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Wonderful to be non-Jew in Israel

I've just come back from Israel and want to write about it, but how?

It's not that I have nothing to say. In fact, I have too much. I don't know where to start and I don't know how to say it. I haven't had the time to sort out my ideas yet, and if I learned a lot I know that I don't understand much — just like the Israelis themselves.

But I know one thing. Wow, what a marvelous experience! Let me try a few words and images just to see how they look on paper.

Israelis are crazy. They live in a democracy, in a region where there is no other. They live amid countless, very serious problems, they discuss them endlessly and still keep smiling. They're building a country which doesn't make sense but it works.

Israelis are liars. They tell you that they don't have any water and that they live in the desert. It's a very big lie. There is water everywhere and the desert is getting smaller and smaller every day. They do it with unbelievable irrigation programs, high-level research and plain hard work.

Israelis are unfair, to themselves that is. They criticize everything in sight: cities, people, beaches, politicians, restaurants, Jews, Arabs, Tel Aviv, journalists, the terrible Haifa university, the diaspora, the settlements. But very often I found them to be too harsh on themselves, even unfair. I was glad to remind them, once in a while, that they look better than they think.

Of course there are many things to be criticized in Israel and I will do it in due course. But there is so much that impresses and so little that annoys that I don't see the reason to be so tough.

Let's be frank: I was taken in. I came, I was seduced, I was conquered.

Here is the one thing that impressed me most. It is understandable, of course, that a Jew should feel good in Israel. But I'll tell you one thing: It is wonderful to be a non-Jew in Israel.

Why? Because the relation we have with the Israelis is very different from the one we can have with the Jews of the diaspora. In Israel I can say that I don't agree with the government without being called anti-Semitic, and it feels good.

No one ever hinted in the slightest that I could be anti-Semitic because I didn't agree with something or some-

one. No one ever tried to make me feel guilty about the tragedies the Jews have endured for centuries or about the problems the Israelis encounter today.

Freedom and dialogue are the words. At last there are Jews somewhere in the world who feel strong enough and confident enough to accept something less than absolute perfection and absolute consensus.

I saw Jews criticizing Jews in front of a non-Jew, and it was a wonderful feeling. The people of Israel are the best cure for anti-Semitism. Open and generous, proud and fragile, united on principles but divided on methods, ostentatious but humble, complex, very young and very old, contradictory, sublime and trivial, they are what they are with no excuse to anyone but with no excuse for themselves either.

Crazy Israelis: They have no water, but you should see the flowers everywhere. Each one of them has been planted by hand and each one of them has to be watered by hand, endlessly. And it works.

Crazy Israelis: They have 400 per cent inflation but no unemployment because they say they can't afford it.

Crazy Israelis: They aren't very rich, but when they greet you they treat you like a king and make you feel like one.

Crazy Israelis: They live on a very small island with a little bridge to Egypt, but they have to jump over the neighboring countries when they want to make contact with the rest of the world. Yes, they suffer from this isolation. Yes, they don't like the Arabs for it. Yes, they're often unjust to Arabs. Yes, they admit it. Yes, they know they will have to solve the problem one way or another.

No, they don't know how. They don't know how to get out of Lebanon. They don't know what they should do with the occupied territories. They don't know how they're going to solve inflation.

Yes, there are racists in Israel. Yes, there are fanatics there. Yes, there are bad people. They know it. They don't really know how to cope with them, but they try very hard.

Yes, there are good and bad Jews. They know it. They also know, as I do, that Israel won't be moved. It's there to stay. No, they don't know how, but they'll do it.