

Somber Time for Fords

By Dorothy McCardle
and William Gildea

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In sharp contrast to the first two dinners last month, President and Mrs. Ford Thursday night hosted Israeli Prime Minister and Mrs. Yitzhak Rabin at a White House affair marked by its subdued mood.

One of the guests, Sen. Edward Brooke (R-Mass.), commented that the atmosphere was "quite somber."

Even when President Ford introduced the young violinist, Eugene Fodor, to his after-dinner guests in the East Room, his tone was notably serious. Finally he struggled for a moment of humor, saying that he realized that "Fiddler on the Roof" has been a great success as a play and that "it's nice to have a fiddler under the roof at the White House tonight."

Mr. Ford's guests laughed and applauded as if they were grateful for a light touch.

Fodor, who tied for second place last summer in the Tchaikovsky Violin Competition in Moscow, then played some of his prize-winning pieces.

After the concert, the President, whose administration has been swept in recent days by public controversy, made himself available briefly to reporters. He was visibly tired.

"You seem so subdued," said a reporter.

"Do I?" he said. Then he described two very full work days he has put in, mentioning that he had gotten to bed at 12:30 a.m. Thursday

and risen at 7:30. When someone asked him what he thought of former President Nixon's health, Mr. Ford replied, "I haven't talked to President Nixon for three weeks."

When a reporter asked him if he didn't think his pardon last Sunday of Nixon was precipitous, he answered, "Not in my view," then turned away to chat with a group of Israeli guests.

Moments later he went off in search of Mrs. Rabin, locating her in the Red Room with Prime Minister Rabin and Mrs. Ford. He asked Mrs. Rabin to dance and led her to the dance floor for a slow-paced number, as Mrs. Ford and Rabin joined them.

The mood wasn't lightened any by actress Jayne Meadows, who managed to have a good cry before the evening's toasts. She was sitting with U.S. Ambassador to Israel Kenneth Keating and Mrs. Max Matzkin, president of Hadassah in New York City, and the three of them were comparing notes on their backgrounds. Mrs. Matzkin said that she had been born at Ellis Island when her mother emigrated from Europe, and Miss Meadows, whose husband is TV personality Steve Allen, remarked that she had been born in China. Then they agreed that it was moving to see the Statue of Liberty in New York's harbor.

"I just couldn't help crying," said Miss Meadows. "It seemed so wonderful to be here and to be in America today."

"I had tears in my eyes, too," said Keating, and so did Mrs. Matzkin.

The main source of the downcast atmosphere was members of the White House staff who had been in contact with former President Nixon and his family in San Clemente.

Some of them said they had talked to Mrs. Nixon, and were told that she had been trying to raise her husband's spirits and also trying to get her husband to go to the hospital. Nixon's former White House physician Dr. Walter Tkach reportedly was flying to California Friday morning to try to persuade the former President to enter Eisenhower Memorial Hospital in Palm Springs for treatment of his phlebitis.

One White House aide, who said she did not want her name used, said she had been told during a White House telephone conversation with California, that Mr. Nixon's leg is now very swollen above the knee and that he is in such pain that he cannot walk, play golf or swim.

The one person at the dinner who seemed to be in good spirits was Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. When his wife, Nancy, was complimented on her new upswept hair style and Oscar de la Renta taffeta gown, he joked, "Hasn't anyone got a good word to say for me? You know I'm very insecure. And all everybody does is talk about my wife."

In his toast to the Rabins, the President noted that 1948 "was a significant year as far as your country is concerned and quite a year as far as the Fords are concerned," mentioning that that was the year the Fords were married, the year he

was elected to Congress and the year Israel gained independence. Mrs. Rabin interjected that she and the prime minister also were married that year. Mr. Ford went on to cite the "understanding" and "sympathy" that the American people have for the Israelis, and the two countries' "durable friendship."

Rabin then cited a gift that he had brought to the President, a sculptured sterling silver figure of David slaying Goliath. He said Israel was represented by "the spirit of David seeking peace and at the same time being ready to meet some Goliaths." The former ambassador to the U.S. recalled earlier meetings with Mr. Ford when he was House minority leader when, Rabin said, he "learned very much to admire you."

Rabin has come to Washington seeking military and economic aid, while the U.S. officials want to get certain commitments from him on future Middle East peace negotiations.

Shortly after 8 p.m. Thursday the Fords greeted their guests at the North Portico. The President seemed relaxed and chatted momentarily with photographers. Mrs. Ford wore a yellow chiffon dress with large dots of opaque material, long sleeves, a high neck and a single string of pearls. Mrs. Rabin wore a sand-colored two-piece dress with long sleeves and a bow at the neckline.

The Fords escorted the Rabins upstairs to the Yellow Oval Room. Shortly, they descended the grand staircase to meet the 115 guests, who then dined on



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Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, standing, addresses guests at the state dinner at the White House Thursday night.

halibut and roast duckling in the State Dining Room.

Near evening's end, 10 minutes before midnight, President and Mrs. Ford escorted the Rabins out to their car. The President stood chatting and then Mrs. Ford came down the stairs and kissed Mrs. Rabin goodbye.

As the Rabins were driven away, the Fords turned, said a few words to Israeli Ambassador and Mrs. Simcha Dinitz, and came back inside. Someone remarked of the President, "He looks terribly tired." His eyes appeared bloodshot.

He turned to a group of

women reporters and said "Goodnight girls." He skipped any dancing with Mrs. Ford, unlike the early state dinner for Jordan's King Hussein and an Aug. 28 dinner for administration officials.

For whatever reason—his

recent heavy schedule or the criticism over the Nixon pardon—the gaiety of the earlier two dinners was missing. The Fords disappeared into the usher's office to take the elevator upstairs, leaving the dancing to others.