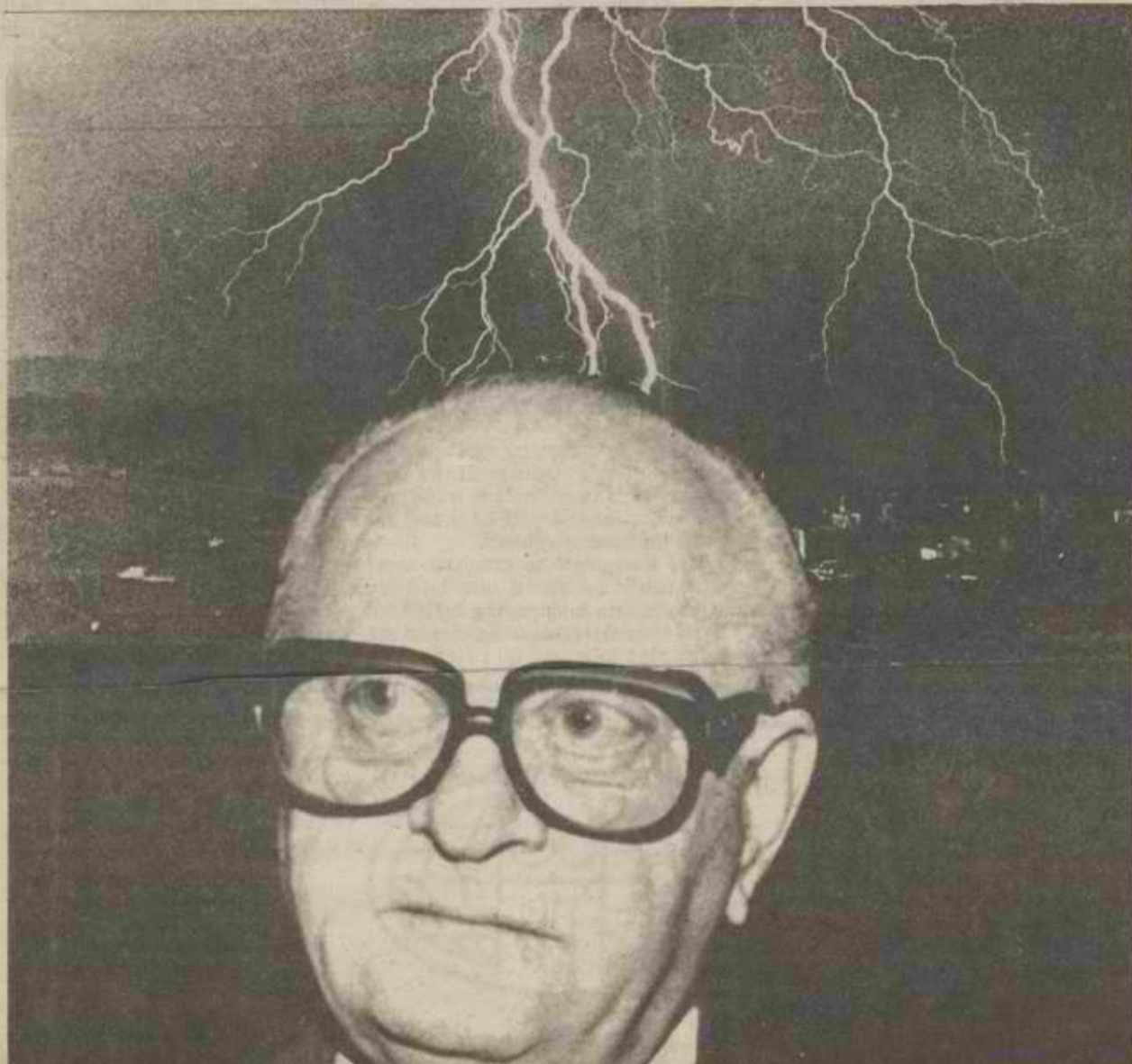


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The cabinet's lightning rod

Simha Ehrlich has set his own three-month deadline for changes in the cabinet. In a Rosh Hashana interview, the Finance Minister also tells Post Political Correspondent MARK SEGAL that he feels he's been made the target for attacks on the government.



But one cannot carry on for a long time — another three years at the most." The last phrase was said with emphasis. "That's the whole truth." Why hadn't Begin given him the proper backing?
Ehrlich chose his words carefully: "I cannot really complain about the premier. I do not have any reason to say anything." A pause; then correcting himself with a grin: "At any rate, I won't say anything right now."

HE CONFIRMED my contention that he had not enjoyed the requisite support from either his fellow Likud ministers or MKs. He enumerated some reasons:

"I'll tell you, members of the Likud caucus still have to leave the opposition benches: they have not yet become accustomed to being in government. Then there is a lot of frustration on the Knesset benches: they don't want to be parliamentarians, but in executive positions. On top of which there is Jewish masochism, as well as the general decline in standards."

As a veteran of three parliaments, Ehrlich spoke wistfully of the present House. "The Ninth Knesset, I regret to say, has hit an unprecedentedly low level," he said, proceeding to censure his squabbling Likud MKs. "They don't realize that they are cutting the ground from under their own feet. If they persist in undermining the government and force us to the polls, they will suffer, because we will return fewer MKs."

We spoke of the scant publicity given to his rescue of the government from a dangerous impasse last week because of the Yadin-Sharon row. He had arrived at the weekly cabinet meeting to find Begin and most of the ministers simply sitting there, with the three Democrats waiting in another room. After running back and forth between them, Ehrlich found a face-saving formula and defused the tension. "It's like stopping a small fire before it becomes a roaring furnace," he said. "It's the same in politics. If you don't smooth over a quarrel it can develop into a first-class national crisis."

BACKTRACKING TO internal party politics, I wondered whether the proposed merger of the Likud parties was designed to dodge the pressure for a cabinet reshuffle? The Liberal Party executive chairman replied that one had nothing to do with the other, brushing aside mention of Dr. Rimalt's sally that the Liberals have been reduced to a bourgeois wing of Revisionism.

"If Herut and the Liberals continue in their separate frameworks, they will soon reach a dead end. We need to evoke an entirely new political framework in the coming two years," he averred.

Would it include the Democrats? "They can join too," he said. He explained his prognosis: "The emergence of the new Tehiya Party must of necessity push Herut towards the centre of the political spectrum. The extremists in Herut and other parts of the Likud will gravitate to Tehiya. That means that Herut will combine with the Liberals into a new party representing all classes and all communities."

Ehrlich's good temper soured somewhat when I mentioned the intrigues within his own party. The struggle there, he was at pains to point out, had nothing to do with ideology, but was a personal tug-of-war.

(Continued overleaf)

A YEAR AGO, Israel's fifth finance minister called on his good friend, the sixth prime minister. Over glasses of piping hot tea, Reb Simha advised Reb Menahem to reshuffle his cabinet.

"As I have urged on frequent occasions since then," said Finance Minister Ehrlich in our Rosh Hashana interview, "all ministers myself included — should put their portfolios at the premier's disposal and allow him to use his prerogative to reshape his government. To my regret, he declined." Why did Begin refuse? Ehrlich thought it was a matter of coalition arithmetic.

"We started off with a majority of 77, today we are down to 65, and that's not a final figure. There is no certainty that we will not lose more in the near future."

He enumerated threats to the coalition's stability from Agudat Israel, Yigal Hurvitz's La'am segment, and the Democrats. He had heard that two of the latter party's seven MKs were hovering near the exit.

"The premier is afraid that if he introduces any changes, then everything will fall apart. As he sees it, the government is like a building; if one brick is dislodged the entire structure may collapse. That's why he doesn't want to touch it," Ehrlich explained.

Water on he outlined his objections to early elections, holding that the Likud government must complete its term. The finance minister revealed that when he offered his resignation to the premier two months ago, he was told: "We formed this government together, if you leave I will have to go to the President" and Begin had added, "I could hardly assume theonus of bringing down the Likud, could I?"

Nonetheless, Ehrlich clings to reshuffle his cabinet, and intends raising the matter again as soon as possible. "And if he continues to reject my advice it may be that I will feel obliged to draw personal conclusions."

Does that mean resignation? And does he have a deadline in mind? "I am giving myself three months," comes the firm answer.

He underpinned his intention, when we were discussing the seriousness of the Liberal Party central committee's ultimatum to the party's four cabinet ministers. Who held the stop-watch? I wondered, evoking the spirited response: "If anyone holds a timer, I do."

I FOUND the Finance Minister much more relaxed than on previous occasions, as if he were enjoying a sense of relief after reaching a terribly difficult decision. I wondered to myself why his amiable personality does not come over on television where he always looks so grim and poker-faced behind those huge spectacles. Beneath the burdens of office he remains the same likeable and extremely shrewd politician I had come to know during his years in local government.

While he fought off some ministerial nudnik on the phone, I sized up his pleasant working environment. One wall is covered with a brilliantly-coloured fresco of an unearthly Jerusalem opposite a large photograph of the capital, at night, illuminated by a great flash of lightning. Nearby was a line of Litvinovsky portraits of Ben-Gurion, Weizmann and other founding fathers.

The transitory nature of a politician's life was driven home to me in the waiting-room, where Ehrlich's photo smiled down at me from a gallery of his four

predecessors — Kaplan, Eshkol, Sapir and Rabinowitz; with an acting minister, Zeev Sharef, at the side. In his office, a large portrait photo of an admonishing Sapir gazed down on his successor near a picture of the late Liberal leader Peretz Bernstein — one of the incumbent's few innovations.

EHRlich wears his 65 years well, despite the punishing pace of his work load. Aides told me that his average work day spans 16 hours. His modest life-style has remained unchanged by his cabinet appointment. The minister returns home to the unpretentious three-room flat on Rehov Pinkus in North Tel Aviv, where he has lived for the past 20 years, since his family moved into the old General Zionist housing estate in what was then known as the Rassco Quarter.

He transferred all his shares in the family optics business to his wife, who is its managing director, and both their son and daughter work there. He cleaves to the more stolid old-fashioned bourgeois values, quite unlike the new middle class he represents, with its love of conspicuous consumption and flashy high-living.

Before seeing him, I tried to do my homework properly. As I delved into back copies of the newspapers, I perceived an emerging pattern: Ehrlich would time after time bring to the cabinet proposals that had earned unanimous approval in informal discussions, only to find himself defeated and left out on a limb.

This was certainly the case with his proposed subsidy cut, which the Cabinet threw out, only to accept it — albeit in a watered-down form — a month later.

Then there was the unanimous cabinet vote for budget cuts of five to eight billions, but these had evaporated by the time ministers talked to the waiting media en route to the parking lot.

Digging deeper, I surfaced with the image of the minister as the handy scapegoat for the government's malfunctioning — a more apposite description might be of Ehrlich as the Likud's lightning rod, stuck out there to catch all the flak.

TAKING the plunge after tea and biscuits, I tested my new-found perceptions on my host, wondering whether he conceived himself as the victim of the Begin

government?

"I most certainly agree with you," came the quick response. He followed with a rhetorical question: "Do you know what a Finance Minister needs? He needs a huge fund of inner resources to take it all." But then, adopting a confiding tone, "Finance ministers are never popular anywhere. When I was in Paris recently, I heard endless criticism of their finance minister, and they have a really prosperous economy. When I went to welcome the Danish finance minister at Ben-Gurion Airport, as we walked through the passenger terminal, some people applauded me and called out 'Ehrlich.' Mr. Heinesen was amazed: he told me he would never dare to walk casually in a Copenhagen street."

Ehrlich was gratified that the Israel public had finally begun to realize that he was not acting in isolation, but that the entire government was responsible for the situation.

Did that include the prime minister? "Certainly," he replied.

No, he did not regret having taken the job. "I knew what I was in for. I am at peace with myself and my conscience on that score..."