

Israel showcased in Gaspé community



Matane MNA Pascal Bérubé, left, and Israeli Consul Avraham Lev-Louis view a display at Destination Israel, held in the small Gaspé town.

MATANE, QUE. — An oversized Israeli flag hung last month from the side of a prominent hotel in Matane, a hamlet on the St. Lawrence River in the picturesque Gaspé Peninsula.

Israel was publicly celebrated in this small Quebec community through the two-day "Destination Israel," the brainchild of local Parti Québécois member of the National Assembly, Pascal Bérubé. He spearheaded the presentation, intended to increase understanding of the country and promote tourism, held May 18-19 with the participation of the City of Matane, the Consulate of Israel in Montreal and the Quebec-Israel Committee.

Bérubé is his party's spokesperson for tourism, and was inspired by his participation in a 2009 parliamentary mission to Israel. He now boasts an Israeli flag in his National Assembly office, and makes no secret of his support for the Jewish state.

Bérubé pushed for Israel as this year's focus for the yearly event which has in the past presented China, France and Morocco.

"It may be surprising for some that such an event should take place in a homogenous community like Matane," said Bérubé, "and my being a PQ deputy could be seen as unusual. But first and foremost, I am a friend of the Israeli people. The relationship is not political but a personal conviction." He draws a parallel between the plight and resilience of the people of Israel with his party's aspirations for Quebec.

"I have never hidden my pro-Israeli positions, and sometimes we can use our positions to change mentalities and advance certain issues," said Bérubé.

Bérubé is cognizant of Israel's cultural and religious significance to three of the world's monotheistic religions. But he is also no stranger to Jewish culture; he it through his knowledge of its history or even his avid interest in Jewish popular culture.

The event drew some 500 elementary and high school students, half of the area's student population. A public eve-

ning drew another 200 local residents.

"Tonight, there were many people. Were there manifestations? Were there protests? No," Bérubé commented.

Students placed wishes in small cracks of a reproduction of the Western Wall, ate Israeli chocolate, discovered challah bread and tasted pomegranate and figs.

The event this year also included culinary, musical and artistic components. Local artists depicted notable Israeli landmarks, such as archaeological sites and the architecture of Tel Aviv, as well as the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

Students came prepared after having learned about the country through a teachers' guide describing Israel's climate, its major cities, religions and cuisine. Some students professed having no prior knowledge at all about Israel, while others knew the land as the place where, "Jesus had passed." One thought Israel was simply a name.

Montreal-based Creations Omani featured jewelry by Israeli craftspeople, while singer Marie Trezanini presented a musical journey of Yemeni Jewish songs.

"This is the first destination presentation of Israel outside of Montreal," said Israeli Consul Avraham Lev-Louis. "It's a very unusual event. We always strive to teach the children, to let them understand Israel and its democratic values, its beauty, its culture.

"These children will have a different knowledge, and they are the politicians of the future. This will brand Israel beyond the conflict that is usually portrayed on television."

Lev-Louis sees this project as a potential catalyst for similar presentations in other parts of the province, despite the logistical challenges of organizing events hundreds of kilometres away.

He also sees a possible economic collaboration with Matane, connecting Israel's high-tech sector with this area that is known for its wind turbine and alternate energy firms.

The writer participated in Destination Israel in Matane, taking visitors on a virtual journey to Israel and its cultural sites. He is the editor of the travel website onthe-globe.com.