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| 23.32x20.91               | 1 | 7 עמוד | THE JERUSALEM POST - FRONT | 03.11.2008 | 15532958-8 |
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# 'European visionary' dreams of independence for those with disabilities

• By RUTH EGLASH

For German-born Adolf Ratzka, who was paralyzed by polio as a teenager and is wheelchair-bound, the disabled people of the world are united in a battle for the right to general accessibility, independent life-styles and an end to treatment as second-class citizens.

"It seems to me that this battle is a common ground no matter where you live in the world," said Ratzka, director of The Independent Living Institute in Stockholm, who was the keynote speaker at the first conference on "Independent Living in the Community for People with Disabilities" in Jerusalem last week.

Labeled by *Time* magazine in 1998 as a "European Visionary," Ratzka – who was told after his bout of polio that he would spend the rest of his life in an institution – said that social change could only come about through serious legislation and raising awareness of the multi-faceted difficulties faced by the disabled. He was inspired to become an activist after spending several years in California during the 1960s flower-power period.

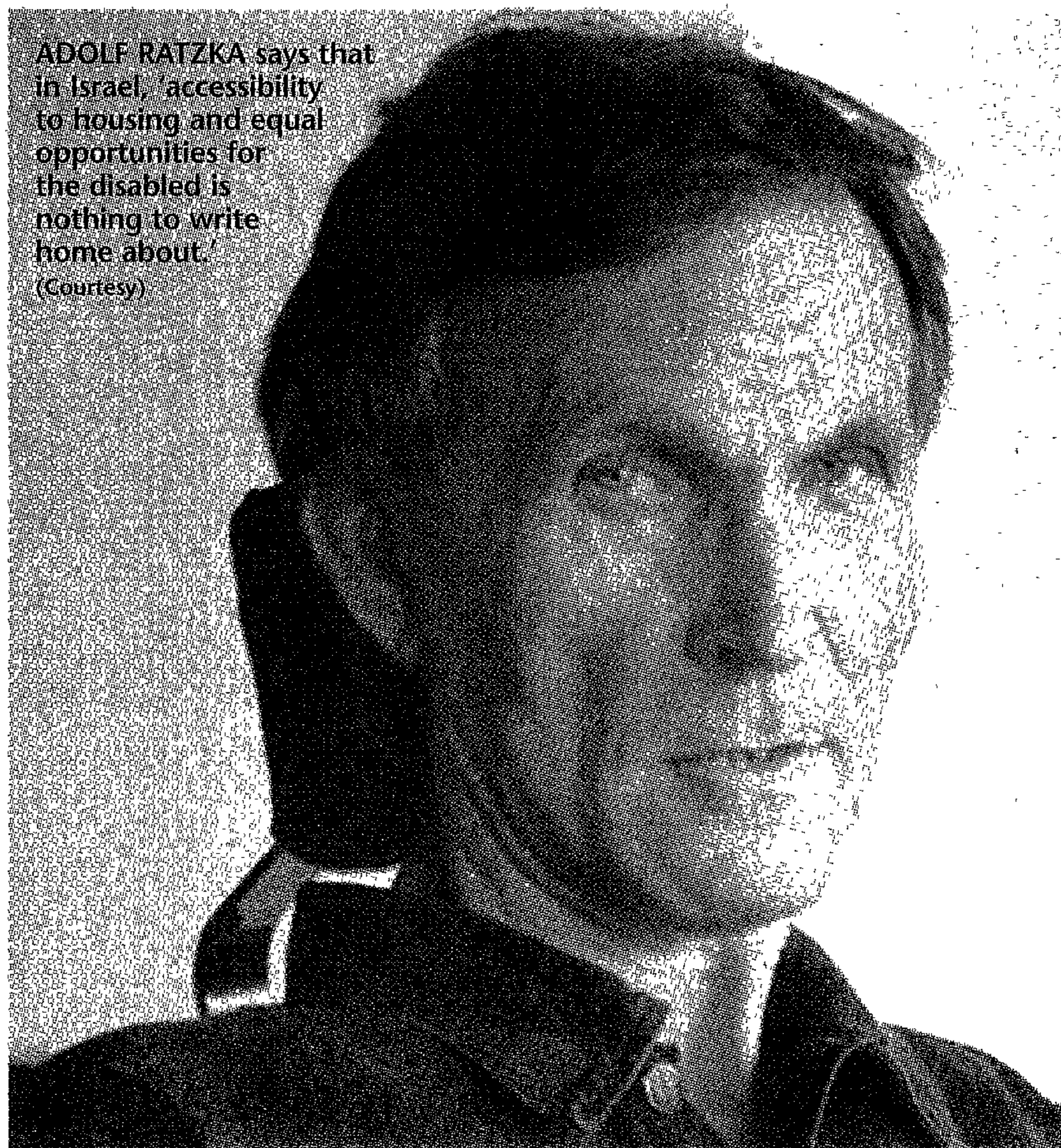
"You need to find allies in the public and among politicians," the 64-year-old said. "You have to work on all fronts and once you find the feasibility of certain solutions to problems then you have to promote them."

That means ensuring accessible accommodation, eliminating discriminatory employment practices, prosecuting those who violate the law and providing the disabled with essential tools such as cars and personal assistants that will allow them to live a normal life without having to rely on others for help, Ratzka said.

In addition to his time in Jerusalem,

ADOLF RATZKA says that in Israel, 'accessibility to housing and equal opportunities for the disabled is nothing to write home about.'

(Courtesy)



Ratzka spent two days in Ramallah talking with disabled Palestinians who run a group called Stars of Hope.

"The issues facing the Palestinian [disabled] are a little different from those in Jerusalem because for them it seems to be more a question of survival than here [in Israel]," he said.

As for Israel and its approach to independent life-styles for the disabled, Ratzka said there seemed to be something of a paradox.

"Israel has a very strong labor politics and social security system in place," he said. "On the other hand, it is a very conservative culture with a lot of emphasis placed on the role and responsibility of the family helping the disabled person. I find that approach puzzling."

Ratzka was disappointed with the level of accessibility for the disabled, particularly in the capital.

"It is hard for me to comment com-

pletely, but what I have seen so far is that Jerusalem is a very tough place to navigate," he said. "Accessibility to housing and equal opportunities for the disabled is also nothing to write home about."

While Ratzka would not discuss whether the living standards for the disabled in Israel had improved over recent years, he did say he was highly impressed at the turnout for the conference. More than 200 people participated in Tuesday's event, including politicians, policy-makers and other state employees.

Daniela Brafman, director of The Center for Independent Living in Jerusalem, told *The Jerusalem Post* on Thursday that Ratzka's visit to Israel and his participation in the conference had given a boost to the disabled in Israel and "strengthened the battle for improving their rights."

"It is not that everything is perfect in Sweden for disabled people," she said. "It's just that he [Ratzka] personally overcame his disability and went on to help others."

According to Brafman, roughly 10 percent of Israelis have some level of disability. The state offered a wide variety of benefits that were distributed according to government criteria, she said, but it still had a long way to go.

Established in 2003, The Center for Independent Living in Jerusalem was created with the support of the Joint Distribution Committee Israel, Larry and Leonore Zusman, the National Insurance Institute, the Welfare and Social Services Ministry, the Jerusalem Municipality and private foundations. Brafman said that several additional centers were currently being planned countrywide.