

***Zev’s Los Angeles: from Boyle Heights to the Halls of Power.
A Political Memoir.***

**By Zev Yaroslavsky with Josh Getlin.
Brookline, MA: Cherry Orchard Books, 2023
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Memoir is not uncommon in Jewish Studies. Customary are takes based in Europe, accounts focusing on Holocaust memory, and descriptions of the complexities of Jewish diaspora populations in, largely, the Western world. Less usual are explicitly modern versions. Zev Yaroslavsky proffers such a volume. So modern is this story that it begins with a description of the 2003 Walt Disney Concert Hall, designed by Canadian-American architect, Frank Gehry, ‘the crown jewel of downtown Los Angeles’ (1).

Yaroslavsky’s work is a reflection on being Jewish across more than 60 years in Los Angeles: growing up, becoming an adult, raising a family, working as a public servant, and a multitude of other limbs of the colourful tree of life the author has obviously led. The more than twenty chapters are testament to Yaroslavsky’s varied interests and abilities. Some chapter titles: “The Untold Story of the 1984 Olympics”, “Taking on the LAPD [Los Angeles Police Department]”, “The Crisis That Nearly Bankrupted the County”, and “Confronting the Homeless Crisis”. Still, the author’s roots are far from USA.

The story begins with narrations of an offspring of Jewish immigrants from Ukraine in a family of modest means who trace their roots back to Belarusian Zionists. The author reflects on himself: ‘I can be restless, driven, and intense. But also soft-hearted, empathetic, and self-deprecating’ (3). Links to Czarist and post-revolution Russia lead to descriptions of the clan’s intellectual pedigree and migration to USA in 1923. The movement from the colder east coast to the warmth of California is intertwined with accounts of emotional connections to people of the past. What ensues is a colourful Jewish life with an American taste based in social justice, summer camps, Folk Shule, and some parallel of ‘helping to build a Jewish homeland’ in optimistic climes in the Diaspora.

The political in Yaroslavsky’s life intermingles early with his social and personal work, setting a foundation for the vocation he eventually leads as a public servant. This is after we are given tidbits of anecdotes about life at the University of California, Los Angeles, in the 1960s, the Vietnam War, Nixon, the Apollo Space Mission, and the author’s first trip to the Soviet Union with his father in 1968. It is around a quarter of the way through the book that my initial consideration of how this work is theoretically relevant



beyond its narrative assessment came to me: the writing describes how Jews, like all peoples, get involved in life and feel a sense of obligation to get down and dirty from the start to the end. This is a description of resilience, allegiance, hope, and feeling. It is also one of how family heartache—Yaroslavsky lost his mother early, educational privilege, tenacity, and apparent fascination with all things cultural can produce partial ethnographies of evolving Jewish life far from Israel and Europe. This is surely worthwhile flagging considering we are into fourth-generation memories of the *Shoah*. Some more explicit mention up front of ways these events could appeal to an academic audience might have led to a broader readership.

The book suffers from not having had a good edit; the 380+ pages lead the reader more than a little astray at times. Particularly from midway to towards the end the reader is often left wondering how descriptively Jewish this writing is as opposed to autobiographical recounting by a Jewish man. The photograph section should provide some interest.

Yaroslavsky's is an eclectic and modern take on memoir in Jewish Studies. The result is not only personally and individually biographical, reflective and reflexive; it provides a personal sociological history of Los Angeles and contemporary California from the perspective of a single middle-class Jewish family man. Moving from the realm of the home to the field in which Yaroslavsky worked, one can almost hear the bubbles bubbling among the glitterati at several of the happening functions he attended through the years and which he chronicles. These take place in crisp, well-designed interiors so common in urban Los Angeles, the bastion of the rich, of movie stars, and of the myth of O. J. Simpson. This is, at least, how I imagine these places to be.