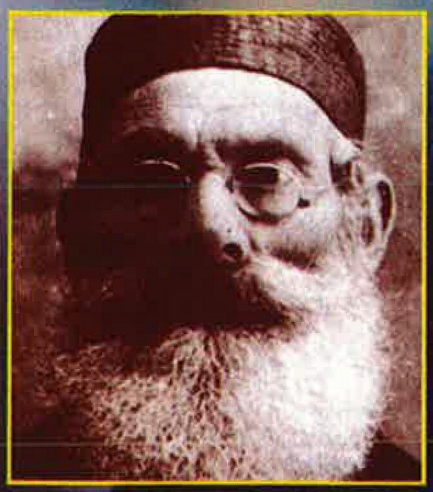
ONE DOLLAR OCTOBER 29, 1979

NEW YORK

KOCH: A Day In the Life

Plus: His Honor's Ancestors, A Colorful Heritage



Grandfather: Yidl Itsik Koch

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Hizzoner's Roots

By Arthur Kurzweil

"...Grandfather and grandson were named Yidl Itsik, but the latter is known to millions by his secular name, Edward I. Koch..."

One day, about a century ago, in a remote corner of Eastern Europe, a certain Yoel Koch met a man named Yisroel Edelstein. They were brought together by a traditional Jewish matchmaker in the town of Laszkowicze, Poland, famous for its annual fair, a week-long market to which people came from miles around to sell their goods and services.

Koch's son was soon married to Edelstein's daughter. They lived in Uścieszko, hometown of the groom's family, and produced eight children. Their fourth child, a boy, was named Leib Koch.

Meanwhile, in the nearby town of Kózlow, another man and his wife had seven children, including a daughter named Yetta. As a teenager, in 1912, Yetta traveled by steamship to New York City, where she met Leib Koch, who had arrived in America by himself, a boy of fourteen, a few years before. They eventually married in the Norfolk Street Synagogue on the Lower East Side.

Leib and Yetta Koch came to be known as Louis and Joyce, and had three children. Their second, a boy, was given the name of his grandfather whose marriage had been arranged by the matchmaker back in Eastern Europe. Both grandfather and grandson were named Yidl Itsik, but the grandson is known to millions of people by his secular name of Edward I. Koch.

One day last winter, nearly a hundred years after the matchmaking at the fair, a woman named Pat Thaler entered the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research carrying an old family photograph. YIVO (in Yiddish the initials stand for Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut) was founded in Vilna, Poland, in 1925. During the Second World War the Nazis seized YIVO's library and archives documenting Jewish life in Eastern Europe, but some of the collection was recovered and was shipped or smuggled to New York. The archives and library, which are the finest of their kind in the world, are now located at 86th Street and Fifth Avenue in Manhattan.

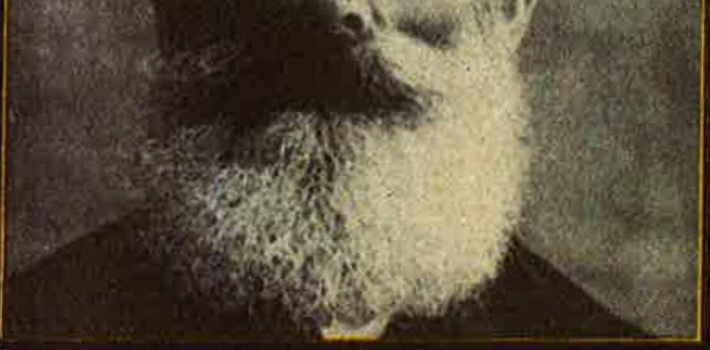
Pat Thaler walked through the large doors of YIVO's building at the perfect moment. The man responsible for cataloging the huge collection of Polish photographs was standing in the lobby. Dr. Lucjan Dobroszycki, one of the Jewish world's finest historians, was eager to see the portrait in Pat Thaler's hands.

He admired the photograph and asked if Ms. Thaler had any more at home. She had, and offered to bring them to him. As she was about to leave she said, "By the way, the old man in the photograph is Mayor Koch's grandfather. I'm the mayor's sister."

Dr. Dobroszycki did some research into the Koch family history with the assistance of Koch's father and sister and me. The result was an album presented to the mayor consisting of a family tree, descriptions of the three Eastern European towns that figured in his history, and an incomplete list of Holocaust victims related to Ed Koch. The mayor was deeply moved, and it occurred to me that a further investigation of the Koch genealogy might prove interesting. The material gathered by Dr. Dobroszycki was considerable, but only a beginning.

Koch's father, a lovely man who still has a thick Yiddish accent after 70 years in America, lives in Fort Lauderdale. He remembered the names of his grandparents, but he was much more vivid about his own experience as an immigrant in New York City.

Arthur Kurzweil is the author of From Generation to Generation, *on tracing Jewish genealogy, to be published next spring.*



Paternal grandfather: Yidl Itsik Koch.



Daughter of the bandit: Yidl Koch's wife. Khaytscha, photographed by Edward I. Koch.

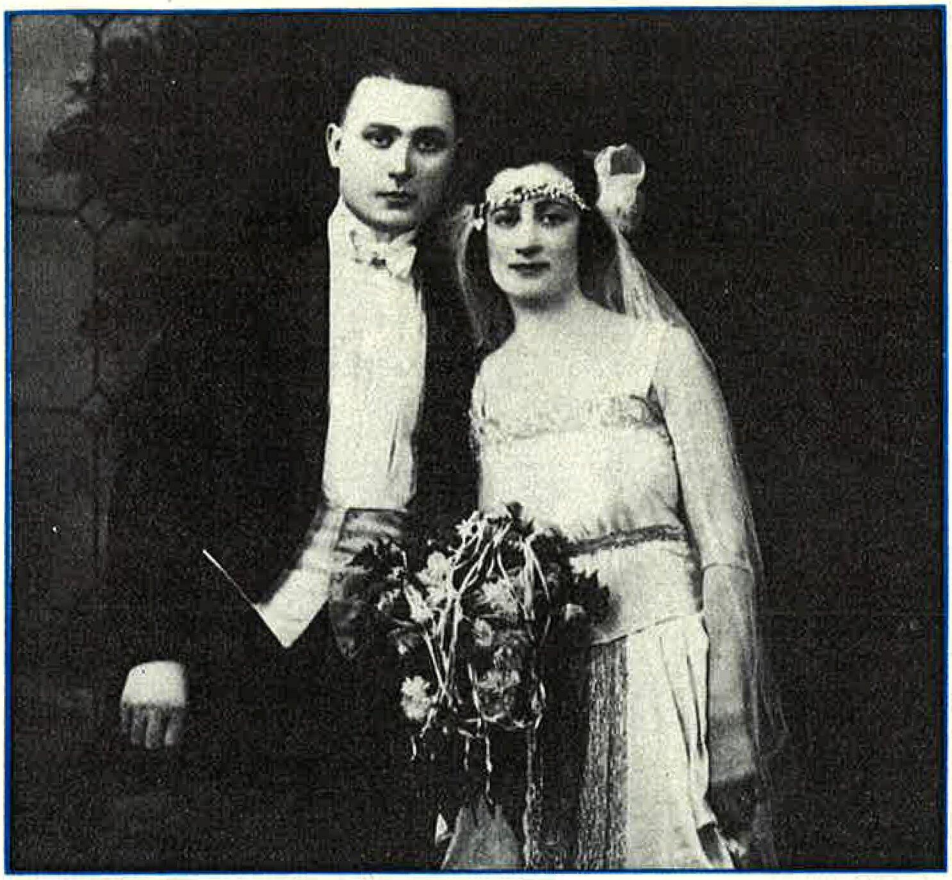


Lost relatives: The mayor's uncle Shrul with his wife—both were killed in the Holocaust—and a son.



...mily portraits. A montage of Koch's mother's family. In the lower corners are his maternal grandparent

"...Pinyas, himself an orthodox Jew, headed a gang of Gentiles. They stole from rich Polish noblemen and gave to the poor..."



Wedding picture: The mayor's parents, Leib and Yetta Koch, in 1919.

Arriving alone in America at age fourteen, Louis Koch worked for a boys'-pants manufacturer for two weeks without pay before being hired for $2.50 a week. Later he switched to the fur business, and he stayed in it for the rest of his working life, going bankrupt several times in the process. In the meantime, he and Yetta Silpe, the young immigrant girl he married, had their children: Harold, the oldest, is an executive and designer in the carpet business; Pat, their daughter, is director of continuing education at Marymount Manhattan College; Ed, their second son, is the mayor.

There comes a point when the genealogical researcher, whatever his written resources, must turn to the memories of the oldest surviving members of the family and community. How far back can these memories be thrown? In the case of Ed Koch, the "furthest-back person" is Yisroel Edelstein, the mayor's great-grandfather. I knew the name of one other great-grandfather of Koch's, but I chose Edelstein because he came from the town of Skala, Poland, and I happened to know the president of an organization called the Skala Benevolent Society. This society is a typical *Landsmannschaft*, a Jewish organization of immigrants all from the same town.

Max Mermelstein, a New York travel agent, is the current president of the Skala Society. I called him when I learned that part of Koch's family came from Skala. Excited, he asked, "What was the family name in Skala?" "Edelstein," I replied. "The mayor's great-grandfather who came from Skala was named Yisroel Edelstein."

Mermelstein said that he had never heard of Edelstein but added, "I know a gentleman, one of the oldest still around from Skala, who has an excellent memory and is the kind of guy who knows everything and everybody. I'll call him and get back to you."

Two days later Mermelstein called back. He began by saying, "I have a story to tell you. It is very interesting." He went on: "I spoke with this man, this old man who knows the town history and all its people, and I asked him if he knew Yisroel Edelstein. As soon as I said the name, he said to me, 'Of course! Don't you know this person?' I said, 'How am I to know? This is before my time.' But the man went on and began to tell me who Yisroel Edelstein was. As soon as he began the story I knew who he was talking about. Let me tell you. Yisroel Edelstein was a gangster.

"He was known by the nickname of Hersh Pinyas, a Yiddish name. He was the head of a gang of Gentiles but was himself an orthodox Jew. And this gang which he led was known to steal money and jewelry from rich Polish noblemen and give what they stole to the poor. He was a Robin Hood figure. By the way, he was known never to steal on Saturday, the Sabbath. And I might add that the whole story is written in a book by Chune Gottesfeld called *Vos Ikh Gedenk fun mayn Lebn*. It's in Yiddish, and the New York Public Library and YIVO have it."

I was stunned. I asked, "Does the book say that Hersh Pinyas was Yisroel Edelstein?" Mermelstein said, "No. The book just called him Hersh Pinyas. This was his alias. But the old man I talked to was positive that it was him. He was certain. And when I told him, as you told me, that Yisroel Edelstein's daughter was named Khaytscha, he said, 'Yes, I know. This is him for sure.'"

I looked back at my notes to see what Ed Koch's father might have remembered about his own grandfather, Yisroel Edelstein. Louis Koch told me that all he remembered hearing about his grandfather was that at the age of 72 he divorced his second wife for refusing to go with him to Israel. So he went himself and died there. I had doubted this story but recorded it anyway. Mermelstein finally said to me on the phone, "Hersh Pinyas was arrested and died in prison." The Yiddish book version says he was killed in prison by guards when he tried to escape. It made sense to me that the family, long ago, might have invented the story that Yisroel Edelstein, alias Hersh Pinyas, went to Israel to die.

To verify the story, I called the old man myself. He refused to talk to me, saying over and over that I would not understand. He seemed to wish he had never divulged this information in the first place. I then called the mayor's father and asked him if he remembered his grandfather being called "Hersh Pinyas." He said, "It's possible but I don't remember." Finally, I called Mermelstein again. He repeated that without a doubt the old man was sure of his memory on the matter.

And there it stands. The mayor's great-grandfather was almost surely a gangster, but a *good* gangster. Let the Republicans make of it what they will. ▬