

Literary Section



I, Koch

A Decidedly Unauthorized Biography of New York Mayor Edward I. Koch
By Arthur Browne,
Dan Collins
and Michael Goodwin
(Dodd, Mead, N.Y.,
304 pages, \$18.95)

Reviewed By
ROBERT L. COHEN

Edward I. Koch, the 105th mayor of New York and, according to the authors of *I, Koch*, "the best-known Jewish politician in the country," seems to bring out the worst — and, frequently, the anti-Semitic worst — in his (many) critics.

Speakers at one Black church observance referred to the years of Koch's administration as a "Reign of Terror" — which, considering the several thousand executions that characterized the original, may mark a new benchmark of absurdity in metaphorical generalization.

No less than *The New Yorker's* Andy Logan, in a recent "Around City Hall" column, referred to Koch's anger at the United Nations as inspired by "what he considered to be [!] its bias against Israel" (italics mine) — just another example, presumably, of Koch's fabled oversensitivity to slights. For Logan, I sense, Koch embodies the outsize influence of Jews and Israel on American politics.

But then again, success seems to have equally brought out the worst in Ed Koch. *I, Koch*, the critical biography of the mayor by Arthur Browne, Dan Collins, and Michael Goodwin (Dodd, Mead, \$18.95), unsparingly depicts his overweening self-absorption; his desperate hunger for approval and (media) attention, and his consuming sense of resentment. This is a man whose "sweatshirt" (in Eric Berne's typically creative locution) seems to read, "I've showed you" in front and "Now I'll get you" in back.

Yet such is the authors' journalistic excellence and professional, if unsympathetic, thoroughness that as they uncover the roots of Koch's egotism and resentment — and faithfully record, meanwhile, his stringent fiscal honesty, his frequent good-government instincts, and his exuberant idealism — we are impelled to more than a measure of respect, and of compassion. It is the opposite of the dislike that many readers of the mayor's self-serving autobiography, *Mayor* — to which this book is a response — felt for its bullying, gloating subject.

Thus Koch, all his life a humiliated outsider, an "ugly duckling," successfully pursues the prerequisites of insider status with single-minded ferocity — and ends, of course, more their slave than their master.

Once a "liberal's liberal" whose campaign agenda of liberalizing sodomy, abortion and divorce laws was seen as too radical even by his Greenwich Village supporters, he becomes a candidate who "would do everything he could to become the candidate the polls said the voters wanted" — the perfect expression not only of '80s-style political packaging but of contemporary marketing ethos generally.

Once successfully packaged, he is, I think, predictably cynical toward the voters who can be so easily conned — though he seems to have always had a shrewd sense of people's "price." (The authors argue — not all that persuasively — that he has

Indeed, given his defensive sense of ethnicity, and concomitant inability to be judged or criticized on his own merits, Koch may have more in common with the Blacks he resents (and the many who resent him) than otherwise — which may, of course, be precisely the rub.

The authors do not help matters here, by seemingly holding Koch to a higher standard because he is Jewish — and, more often, because he has promised (as, surely, have many others?) to be "different."

Thus, it is not enough that Koch helped, significantly and at some personal risk, in the civil rights struggle; he must bleed visibly, acknowledge guilt, feel a "special" obligation (paradoxically, more, rather than less, of one than other whites who did nothing).

More generally, Koch is not allowed by the authors to be in any sense a "normal" politician — which is, of course, again to be treated (not necessarily maliciously) as a sort of generic Jew. His fairly consistent pragmatism and driven ambition are seen, with remarkable ingenuousness, as somehow extraordinary, even unique. And the authors alternately criticize Koch for being too candid (say, with foreign diplomats) and not candid enough (say, with reporters).

Yet the effect, at the hands of these skilled if unfriendly portraitists, is almost the reverse of the scorn that a Goya or Velasquez makes us feel for the pretentious noble who commissioned him.

Instead, one feels almost wistful nostalgia for the Ed Koch who rode a city bus to his first inauguration; for "the kind of guy," according to a former classmate, "who got kind of sick when he saw an old lady homeless in the street"; for the singularly responsive, accessible, hard-working congressman who praised another member because "his word is good" — though the successful Ed Koch is himself no longer trust-worthy.

And one feels terribly sad for the "shy and frightened loner" — a description from adolescence that clearly still applies — in whom a life "devoid of love, affection, or intimate companionship" (Simon and Garfunkel's "I Am A Rock" is a favorite song) has clearly enlarged his resentments to a degree that evokes a complementary nastiness in other hurt people and entirely too much interest, and even fascination, in all of our resentment-laden selves.

Editor's Note: Robert L. Cohen of Brooklyn, N.Y., is a freelance writer and frequent contributor to this newspaper.



always been a not especially principled chameleon as well.)

A media product, Koch is, pitifully, dependent on the adulation of the media: addicted to their attention, hypnotized by their images of himself.

Deified by Rupert Murdoch's trashy *New York Post*, Koch nominates it for a Pulitzer Prize; Murdoch returns the compliment by propelling him, entranced, to a vain pursuit of still higher office — which is, predictably, undone by a self-absorbed interview in *Playboy*. Koch's successive media images have become the major milestones — I nearly wrote millstones — of his career, supplanting what might have been a resume of genuine achievement.

Yet Koch, a true narcissist, can derive no lasting satisfaction even in these unending reflections of himself. The Billy Martin of politics, he must always see himself as victim, and thus as quintessential Jew — for Judaism, to Koch, is always a badge of oppression, never (it appears) a graceful garment.