

Kenneth C. Burt

Yiddish Los Angeles and the Birth of Latino Politics

The Polyglot Ferment of Boyle Heights

THE MENTION OF BOYLE HEIGHTS within certain Jewish circles conjures up images of Los Angeles' lost immigrant experience: a vibrant, pre-World War II, Yiddish-speaking community, replete with small shops along Brooklyn Avenue, union halls, synagogues and hyperactive politics operating within the orbit of the New Deal but shaped by the enduring influence of the Socialist and Communist parties. According to Joseph Roos, who would later become the head of the Los Angeles Jewish Community Relations Council, these immigrants from Eastern Europe considered the city's established Jewish leaders as the "nouveau riche," "German Jews," or even "White Jews."

The Los Angeles Workmen's Circle operated out of a modest house on Evergreen Street until the completion of the two-story Vladeck Center on North St. Louis Street in 1940. Named after Borukh Charney Vladeck, general manager of the *Forverts*, the building provided a venue for a wide range of activities that promoted Jewish culture and politics, linking Boyle Heights to New York's Lower East Side.

The Jewish Socialist *Farband*, once affiliated with the party of Eugene Debs and Norman Thomas, held title to the Vladeck Center, which included numerous offices and classrooms, and a large hall for banquets and meetings. The Jewish Socialists met there, as did the Workmen's Circle and the Jewish Labor Committee (JLC). These groups enjoyed an overlapping membership with each other and with the Forward Association, Amalgamated



A banquet at the Vladeck Center in the Boyle Heights section of East Los Angeles, c. 1950. Photo courtesy of the Los Angeles WC/AR.

Clothing Workers, Jewish Bakers Union, International Ladies Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), and Poale Tzion (Labor Zionists).

A rival network of cultural, political and labor organizations operating within the orbit of the Communist Party animated the struggle against the excesses of capitalism. This included mostly Jewish locals of the Carpenters and the Painters unions in Boyle Heights. The Communist Party had its headquarters on Brooklyn Avenue, and Jewish leftists supported the publication of the Yiddish-language *Morgn Freiheit* and the English language *Daily Worker*.

Los Angeles' Communist Party

branch, the second largest in the nation behind New York City's, enjoyed strong ties to the Los Angeles CIO Industrial Union Council, led by (secret Communist) Philip Connelly. The political linkages became clearer after Connelly married Communist Party head Dorothy Healey, who had, as a teenager, organized fellow Jewish youth in Boyle Heights.

According to August Maymudes, whose father ran the International Workers Order (IWO) in Los Angeles, the leftist fraternal group provided health insurance to ten thousand local members. The IWO-affiliated Jewish Peoples Fraternal Order (JPFO) operated out of Boyle Heights. It had broken off from the Workmen's Circle in 1930 over a dispute about the nature of the Soviet Union and about domestic political strategy.

The liberal-left exercised great

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influence in the immigrant community. This is reflected in the fact that most members of the JPFO and the Workmen's Circle were not card-carrying Communists or Socialists, but their world views were nevertheless shaped by those radical parties and the Yiddish and Jewish-oriented press.

The *Forverts* and *Freiheit* clearly had ideological agendas, as did a third paper in Boyle Heights, the bilingual *Kalifornyer Idische Shtime* ("California Jewish Voice"), which generally pushed a Labor Zionist vision. The *Eastside Journal*, a free weekly, promoted nonsectarian progressive politics; editor Al Waxman pontificated in a column that ran on the left side of the paper's front page. A second Jewish-owned weekly, the *Eastside Sun*, promoted the Progressive Citizens of America, forerunner to the presidential candidacy of (the Spanish-speaking) Henry Wallace.

The community elected a progressive Jewish state legislator, but failed repeatedly to elect one of its own to the Los Angeles City Council. This can be explained in part by the support Councilman Parley P. Christensen received from the Communists, organized labor, and a myriad of interlocking community groups. Christensen had bona fide leftist credentials, having served as the presidential candidate of the Farmer-Labor Party in 1920. In Los Angeles, he proved adept at forming alliances with progressive, labor and minority groups. This was important because the polyglot ninth city council district started in Boyle Heights but extended downtown and then into Central Avenue, which was home to famed African-American jazz clubs. Latinos lived in enclaves downtown and around the edges of Boyle Heights.

Despite the growing diversity, Jews remained culturally and politically dominant in Boyle Heights after

World War II. Yet the trend was clear. Members of the tight-knit Jewish community had started to move westward in search of newer homes, even as Japanese Americans returned to the neighborhood from the wartime internment camps. The largest demographic growth was among Latinos, many of whom had come to the state to escape the violence of the Mexican Revolution, at about the same time as the Russian Revolution. For them, moving to Boyle Heights represented upward mobility.

helped empower Latinos, who often lived among Jews in Boyle Heights or worked together with them in garment factories or other jobs.

The image of Boyle Heights as an early 20th-century melting pot is legendary. It was the subject of a highly successful museum exhibit at the Japanese American National Museum in 2002-03, and during his 2005 campaign, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa drew on the image when he spoke in a campaign commercial

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Westward migrating Jews were met by large numbers of new arrivals from the East Coast. These newly arrived Jews did not enjoy a personal link to Boyle Heights, but the appeal of the old neighborhood was strong, particularly on the liberal-left, among Yiddishists and those concerned with inter-group relations.

Yiddish speakers with ties to Boyle Heights enjoyed enormous sway within the Jewish community. In 1948, for example, the Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) included the head of the ILGWU on the West Coast, Louis Levy, and four prominent businessmen who shared membership in the Workmen's Circle and the Jewish Labor Committee (JLC). Ben Solnit, a shoe manufacturer, was vice president of the JLC and the third vice-president of the JCRC; Pinkhas Karl, owner of Karl's Shoes, was a JLC vice-president and treasurer of the JCRC; Harry Sheer, an attorney, was the treasurer of JLC and a JCRC board member; Julius Levitt was the West Coast editor of the *Forverts*, founding president of the JLC, and a JCRC board member. These men

about Herman Katz, his Boyle Heights schoolteacher. This was a brilliant use of Boyle Heights as a metaphor for progressive multiculturalism, as well as a blatant appeal to Westside Jewish voters. (It worked, in part, because of a shared history that is further explored in my new book, *The Search for a Civic Voice: California Latino Politics*, with a foreword by Mayor Villaraigosa.)

Indeed, the Latino-Jewish relationship in Los Angeles is markedly better than in New York. Not only does Villaraigosa have ties to Boyle Heights, but he was elected by replicating the labor-based, multicultural coalition that Congressman Edward Roybal assembled in 1949 to become Los Angeles's first city council member of Latino heritage. Roybal's election built upon the registration of thousands of Latino voters by the Community Service Organization (CSO), which was affiliated with Saul Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation and quietly bankrolled by the Los Angeles JCRC and wealthy progressives. The Workmen's Circle lead-

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ers in the JCRC advocated for CSO, as did Saul Ostrow, the owner of a Sealy Mattress franchise and a major donor to Henry Wallace's third-party presidential campaign in 1948.

In forming the Roybal campaign in early 1949, the ILGWU partnered with the CSO and the United Steel Workers. The ILGWU's decision to go all out for Roybal was significant because it appeared to violate Samuel Gompers' dictum to "reward your friends and punish your enemies." This tradition of backing pro-labor incumbents accounted for the AFL Central Labor Council's continued support for Roybal's opponent, Councilman Christensen. However, a number of developments had altered attitudes in the Jewish and progressive worlds and caused the Los Angeles CIO Council, along with those in the Communist milieu, to join Socialists in backing Roybal.

First, the JCRC, with representation from business and labor leaders associated with both Jewish left traditions, had become the prime financial benefactor to CSO, the Alinsky group for whom Roybal served as founding president. Moreover, despite their political differences and the divisive nature of the Cold War, the Workmen's Circle and Jewish People's Fraternal Order found common ground in their support of Yiddish-language programs, collaborating, since 1947, in the operation of the Yiddish *mitlshul*, the school for teenagers.

Second, while labor historically backed incumbents, a significant number of Jewish leaders in Boyle Heights had long opposed Christensen. For example, Al Waxman, the uncle of U.S. Representative Henry Waxman, had long used his *Eastside Journal* to champion Jewish candidates.

Third, the Cold War struggle for the

hearts and minds of minority workers also influenced the larger political dynamic. In the 1948 election, the Independent Progressive Party and the Los Angeles CIO Council backed a Latino candidate for the state legislature against an incumbent who had a perfect labor voting record. This dramatic break with past practice underscored the labor-left's commitment to Latino electoral empowerment and created a precedent for backing a Latino challenger over an incumbent. At the same time, they recognized that their arch-rival, the Steel Worker-led, Los Angeles-based National CIO-PAC, had joined the ILGWU at the core of the inchoate Roybal campaign.

Thus, both the Socialist- and Communist-influenced factions within the Yiddish-speaking community and the labor movement ultimately joined Latinos in backing Roybal. This Latino-Jewish alliance helped propel Roybal to a landslide victory.

Interviewing Workmen's Circle members about the election and coalition politics in general provoked some fascinating observations about class, ethnicity and progressive politics.

"We were all children of immigrants — whether Latino, Japanese, Jewish, whatever — and everyone was struggling," stated Rebecca Tuck, then a high school student living with her family in the back of a small grocery store. "[Roybal] came around to every person's door and talked to us," she said, adding that her family "voted for him and we loved him" because of his desire to help all people, regardless of creed.

"We were active in the Roybal campaign," recalled Sam Margolin, then a Workmen's Circle youth leader. "We were involved because he was the underdog, essentially because he was against the establishment." Roybal was "good for the people" echoed Ed Buzin, then a purveyor of out-of-town

newspapers. The ILGWU's Abe Levy likewise spoke with pride about his role in expanding the Roybal coalition within Jewish and labor circles.

According to Eric Gordon, the current director of the Los Angeles district of the Workmen's Circle, the unusual liberal-left and Latino-Jewish alliance behind Roybal's candidacy raised the idea of "Los Angeles exceptionalism." There are at least four areas where Angelenos differed from New Yorkers, he explained: 1) Los Angeles Jews were the first to leave the Socialist Party; 2) Socialists and Communists in Boyle Heights were more willing to work together than in other cities; 3) Los Angeles Jews lived in proximity to and worked in coalitions with Latinos (whereas most civil rights coalitions of this era were Jewish and African-American); and 4) Los Angeles Jews abandoned a progressive incumbent to elect the first Latino to the city council.

In 2005, Jewish voters once again backed a Latino challenger over a friendly incumbent, helping to elect Antonio Villaraigosa as mayor of Los Angeles. In yet another example of the enduring influence of the "Boyle Heights experience," Villaraigosa expressed his post-election appreciation to labor and Jewish constituencies at the annual brunch for the Jewish Labor Committee. The Mayor's office is also supportive of the preservation of the Vladeck Center as a tribute to the city's progressive secular Jewish tradition. Located in the heart of today's Latino community, the building will also serve as a landmark of the birth of coalition politics. ■

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