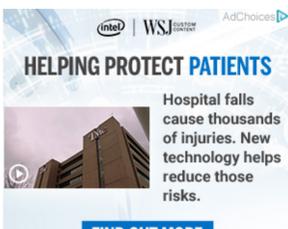




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Book Review: 'The Family,' by David Laskin

The modern history of the Jews is encompassed in the saga of one family spread across Europe, the U.S. and Israel.

By Edward Kosner Oct. 13, 2013 7:24 pm ET

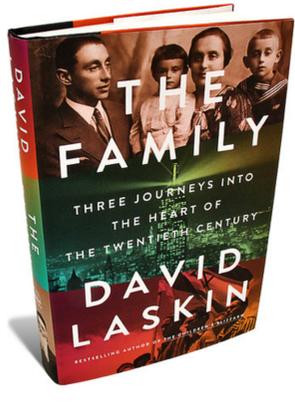
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The unspeakable tragedies and improbable triumphs of the European Jewish diaspora in the 20th century have been told many times but rarely quite so compellingly as in David Laskin's 'The Family.' Mr. Laskin's chronicle could have been written in tears—of torment and scarce joy—and it is at once anguishing and inspiring.

The story begins in 1835 with the birth of Mr. Laskin's great-great-grandfather in the forlorn shtetl of Volozhin in the Pale of Settlement on Russia's western edge. It ends in the second decade of the 21st century with 101 descendants in America, 32 in Israel and only a few gravestones left in Europe. In between are tales of piety amid privation, immigrant courage and industry, Zionist pioneering, Nazi brutality, and the precarious salvation of the Jewish people.

Remarkably, the modern history of the Jews is encompassed in the saga of a single family. One restless daughter, fired by revolutionary socialism, sets off alone for America, where she winds up the millionaire czarina of a brassiere empire. Another goes south and becomes a founding mother of Israel. An uncle journeys from the Pale to the Bronx and then on to Israel, where he dies just short of his 92nd birthday. Others, less intrepid, never leave home and are literally incinerated in the Holocaust. 'History,' writes Mr. Laskin, 'made and broke my family in the twentieth century.'

As a writer, Mr. Laskin is, in a sense, carrying on the family trade. 'My grandfather, great-grandfather, great-great-grandfather, and great-great-great-grandfather were Torah scribes—and for all I know the tradition goes back to the days before the Diaspora,' he writes. Mr. Laskin's great-great-grandfather was Shimon Dov HaKohen, whose six children spawned 25 more. Two of Shimon Dov's sons, Avram Akiva, another scribe, and Shalom Tvi, a leather merchant, produced the families that animate Mr. Laskin's story.



THE FAMILY

By David Laskin (Viking, 383 pages, \$32)

It's a complicated tale that can require frequent reference to the two-page genealogy that conveniently opens the book. Avram Akiva HaKohen's brood found its way piecemeal to America and became the Cohens. One daughter, the dressmaker Itel, started making bras so that her customers could look better in flapper fashions—the genesis of the company that gave the world the ad campaign: 'I dreamed I went to the opera in my Maidenform bra.' Itel was smart, industrious and relentless. 'A callow young man,' Mr. Laskin writes, 'introduced to Itel for the first time, tried to break the ice with the glib opener 'I understand you're with Maidenform.' 'I am Maidenform,' was her withering reply.'

Three of Itel's brothers, Harry, Hyman and Sam, started selling household decorations and appliances on New York's Lower East Side. They brought their parents to America and made their fortunes building a business that was ultimately sold to Ronald Perelman, today the billionaire master of the buyout.

Avram's brother Shalom Tvi had five daughters. All married, and four stayed in the old country. Shalom Tvi left his family only once, for a visit to Avram in America that saved his life. The outbreak of World War II trapped him in the U.S., and so he lived to settle in Israel after the war with his daughter Sonia, a Zionist pioneer who had married her first cousin.

The success of the American branch of the family is all but eclipsed by the destruction of those who chose to stay in Europe or waited too long to try to escape. Shalom agonized in America as news dribbled out of the Nazi extermination of millions of Polish, Russian and other Jews. After the war, he learned the full horror of the slaughter of his people—the machine-gunning, gassing and conflagrations in synagogues and yeshivas with Jews locked inside, the death pits.

Sonia survived all the trials that young Zionists experienced in Palestine—sun-scorched, malaria-ridden kibbutzim and cooperative farms, Arab raids and ambushes, the stiff-necked rejection of Jews fleeing Hitler by the British, who oversaw Palestine by mandate. Sonia and her husband, Chaim, settled on Bedouin land bought by the Jewish National Fund, and Mr. Laskin observes: 'The tragedy of modern Palestine was that one oppressed, thwarted people had come to settle among, and inevitably to displace, another oppressed, thwarted people.'

Sonia bore four children. Her youngest son, Benny, turns out to be Mr. Laskin's collaborator on this book, handing him a trove of 281 family letters in Yiddish that give his narrative its texture and resonance.

Mr. Laskin recounts atrocities in the same simple, almost folkloric prose that he uses to tell the rest of his story. He writes at one point of the 1942 assault on the ghetto in Vilna, once 'the Jerusalem of Lithuania': 'The killing had stopped. The old, sick, and disabled, the strong, healthy, and male—and plenty of others besides—were already dead.'

And before the ultimate annihilation, he painstakingly describes the humiliation and abuse of the Jews under the Romanov czars in Russia, the anti-Semitic Poles, Cossack marauders, and all the others who drove them to flee to America and Palestine before the Nazis' Final Solution.

'The Family' is a very emotional book. It has no overt message, but the lesson of its narrative is hard to miss: The survival of the Jews has hinged in some sense on the establishment of the state of Israel. Yet it is the U.S. that has given the Jewish people the secure homeland they have sought since the destruction of the Temple, where Mr. Laskin's ancestors may well have been living in Torah passages in days lost to memory.

Mr. Kosner is the author of 'It's News to Me,' a memoir of his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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