

IT HAPPENED 38 YEARS AGO TO ZEV AND ME

February 25 was an anniversary of sorts for me and for Zev Yaroslavsky. On that day, 38 years ago, both of us officially became Los Angeles' greatest experts on the history of the Tangguts people! I am modest when I say "Los Angeles". I wouldn't be surprised if we knew more about the Tangguts than anyone else in California, or maybe even in the rest of the U.S. of A.

What's that you say? You never heard of Tangguts people? And you don't really much care about them and their history? I don't blame you. Furthermore, way back when, in the 1960s, I felt exactly the same way. But then things changed.

Today, Zev Yaroslavsky is probably one of the most important politicians in California. He and the other four Los Angeles County Supervisors rule an empire that is bigger, richer and stronger than most countries that sit in the U.N. The county – the largest in the U.S. - spends over \$25 billion a year, has over 10 billion people living on its 4800 square miles and employs thousands upon thousands of people. The nice thing about being a County Supervisor is that most of the citizens don't know and don't care who their supervisors are, aren't sure what they do and, once elected, chances are they are going to stay in office for a very, very long time unless they are caught doing something very obscene or disgusting on television and, maybe, not even then.

But way back in the 1960s Zev wasn't a powerful mover and shaker. He was just a graduate student at UCLA, cramming for his M.A. and spending (some said, "wasting") his time fighting for the free emigration of Jews from the Soviet Union. I too became involved in the campaign – my knowledge of Russian was very useful - and we became close friends. Zev taught Hebrew at synagogues, worked summers at my business answering phones and from time to time the Jewish Federation would hire him to work with students but he was always fired after a few months for being too active. Eventually, Zev and I formed the So. California Council for Soviet Jews and Zev was named executive director with the princely salary of \$125 a week. He would come to our house and raid the refrigerator and hoped that after graduation he could work as a sports announcer or a weatherman on TV.

Zev had taken a course in Russian at UCLA which enabled him to slowly read Russian texts without knowing what he was reading and say important things like “hello”, “goodbye”, “thank you”, “you have beautiful eyes” and “where is the men’s room?”

Still, he knew more Russian than most Americans and sometimes bragged about it. So, in 1970, when he started a new history class, he was flattered when the professor asked, “Mr. Yaroslavsky, I am told that you speak Russian. Is this correct?”

Zev blushed modestly, lowered his eyes and admitted, “Yes, sir, I do.”

The professor beamed. “Wonderful, wonderful. I have a treat for you. Here is a Russian book published by the Soviet Academy of Sciences in 1968. It is a history of the Tanggut people. I want you to use the book to write a term paper for the course.”

Zev took the book, nodded, smiled and tried to look happy. He wasn’t. Then, panicked, he called me. We agreed to spend the next two or three weekends writing the term paper.

Did you know that the Tanggut state of Hsia-hsia has a unique and little known history? That the king Da-meng died in 1031 and his son inherited the title of ruler? That the Tanggut, in the words of Marco Polo, were “heavy set, snub-nosed, dark haired, and lacking in beards and moustaches” and raised horses, pigs, yaks, sheep and, eventually, camels as well? By 1158 they were minting their own coins and played the lute and lyre (Kung Hao), made their own paper and were predominantly Buddhist.

By the 13th century the Tanggut were gone and by the third weekend we were done with what we thought was a brilliant paper that contained information that had never before been known in California.

The paper was turned in on February 25, 1970. A week later Zev called. Broken hearted and furious – “We didn’t get an “A” – the SOB gave us a “B”!

Eventually he graduated, ran for office, was elected and re-elected again and again and is the political force that he is today. A few years ago he told me that there was an epilogue to the Tanggut story.

He had gone to the UCLA campus and was sharing an elevator with an elderly lady who kept looking at him and finally asked, “Aren’t you Zev Yaroslavsky, the L.A. Supervisor?”

“Yes, I am”, Zev said.

“Mr. Yaroslavsky, my husband had you in the history class he taught,” she said and named the professor.

Zev told me that he will always be embarrassed by what he said then. “Your husband? That is your husband? I remember him very well. He gave me a “B” when I know I deserved an “A”.

The elevator came to a stop and the lady left without another word. I guess the hurt of 38 years ago had never left him.