

## A MEMOIR IN SNAPSHOTS

*JACOB'S CANE*

ELISA NEW

Basic Books, 2009, hb, 328 pp, \$27.95

Reviewed by AGI ERDOS

Inspired by the mysterious engraving on her great-grandfather Jacob's old walking cane, English professor Elisa New embarks on a journey to eastern Europe to retrace her ancestral roots. In this mixture of biography, personal journal, and world history, the

narrative of forebears long dead is pieced together like a puzzle, and characters from the fading family photos come alive as the author combines the

information she gathers from documents and from living relatives with her own information.

In the late 19th century Jacob Levy and Bernhard Baron leave the Lithuanian town of Shavli and become successful businessmen in Baltimore and London, respectively. Their story unfolds against the little-known backdrop of the growth of the cigarette industry. With his invention of a cigarette-rolling machine, Baron establishes himself as one of the greatest industrialists of his time – and certainly the most socially aware. True embodiments of the social democratic ideal, both Baron and Levy prided themselves on managing their businesses in a way that provided maximum worker satisfaction and avoided any form of exploitation.

With its slow pace and eclectic structure, the book is like a photo album: the reader is made to pause here and there to take a closer look at an image: now a snapshot of turn-of-the-century Jewish middle class in Baltimore,

now a heart-rending description of the mass murder of Lithuanian Jews or a letter by a nephew sent from the trenches in Alsace. New's story abounds in interesting historical detail I have never come across before, and presents the events of the grand narrative of history, such as the American participation in the Second World War or the Blitz in London, in a new, personalised light, through the lives of her own ancestors.

*Jacob's Cane* is not a page-turner but it is a good and engaging read. And despite my initial confusion over all the names of people and places thrown at me right in the first chapter – which could be a reflection of how the author herself must have felt when she first plunged into her family's history – slowly all the pieces fell into place. What were mere names at the beginning became real-life, intriguing personalities, and places I hadn't even known existed before grew rich with history and meaning. A gem of a book for lovers of history.

