

TV REVIEW; 'Meet Me' a Delightful Bit of History

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Count on local commercial stations showing the occasional piñata or glimpse of a Passover Seder, which is about the extent of their commitment to this area's rich culture and ethnicity.

That's reason enough to welcome "Meet Me at Brooklyn & Soto," Ellie Kahn's 55-minute film recalling the Jewish community of 70,000 that once thrived within the East Los Angeles neighborhood of Boyle Heights, where now only a handful of Jews remain in one of the largest Spanish-speaking areas in Southern California.

Another reason is that it's a delight--nothing elegant or fancy, but something that lifts talking heads to high art while preserving some of the aromas of urban history.

The documentary is the core of a 90-minute KCET special that begins Sunday with Huell Howser's brief chat with Kahn and ends with his own walking tour of a vastly different Boyle Heights than the one memorialized by her.

What remains from those old days are the famed Breed Street Shul, once known as the queen of synagogues but now a seedy ruin with an uncertain future, and Zellman's Men's Store, a fixture for 60 years.

The street now known as Cesar Chavez Avenue was once named Brooklyn Avenue, and its intersection with Soto was the heart of the largest Jewish community west of Chicago in the 1920s, '30s and '40s--a throbbing working-class society whose roots were primarily in East Europe.

The area was, we hear, a boardwalk of theaters, stores, cafes and delicatessens. Picture the scene--pickle barrels standing outside Cantor's Deli alongside an old man with a beard grinding beets into horseradish.

Helping you picture it are some of the 150 people interviewed in preparation for this film, which was commissioned by the Jewish Historical Society. An oral historian, Kahn complements these on-camera testimonies from former Boyle Heights residents (the oldest of whom died recently at age 95) with old photos and a narration from actor Harold Gould.

Kahn says that a couple of former residents she contacted worried about the film's nostalgia softening reality. But the ethnically mixed Boyle Heights depicted here is not one of constant harmony, even though we do hear stories of connections made between diverse cultures. For instance, Clara Zilberstein recalls her mother managing to converse in detail with a Mexican man even though neither spoke the other's language. Her mother explained, "A heart can feel another heart."

We hear also of conflicts between Jews who spoke Yiddish and those who felt that doing so would block them from the U.S. mainstream. We hear Pauline Furth, who has been practicing medicine in Boyle Heights for four decades, recall the Vegetarian Cafe, "where you could walk in at any time, and there would be every type of discussion."

It was in this neighborhood too that Jewish gangsters once trod, along with the creator of the first bagel machine. We learn that the politics here were often so leftist that Karl Marx was thought reactionary, that makeup king Max Factor once lived here, and so did Joe Resnick, "the first guy to put herring on ice in Los Angeles."

The big Jewish exodus from the area began after World War II, Gould says. And Kahn herself has now moved onto another project, this time preparing a documentary about students at Palms Middle School in West Los Angeles making oral histories with their family elders, using skills she has taught them.

Back in Boyle Heights, meanwhile, her film shows a former Menorah center being put to good use as a community center for Latino youths. One heart feeling another.

* "Meet Me at Brooklyn & Soto" airs Sunday at 6:30 p.m. and again Oct. 26 at 6:30 p.m. on KCET-TV Channel 28.

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