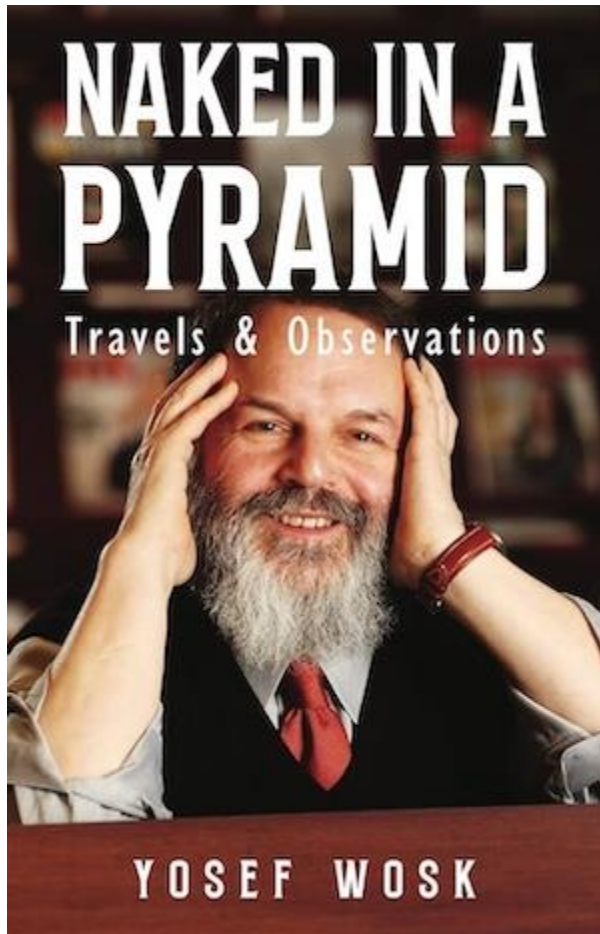


Jewish Independent review by Pat Johnson, January, 2024

Traveling beyond the world



In his new book, *Naked in a Pyramid: Travels & Observations*, scholar, rabbi and philanthropist Yosef Wosk brings readers along on his extraordinary journeys throughout the world. But this is no Rick Steves guidebook. There are no hotel recommendations or Top 10 must-see lists. Far from it. Rather than inspiring wanderlust, in fact, some of Wosk's adventures will make the reader happy to be home in an easy chair experiencing vicariously rather than accompanying him on these not-always-alluring quests.

Wosk acknowledges that travel for him is not about R&R but always about adventure, challenging himself to discover not only the world but his place in it. Travel, for him, is “more of an intuitive imperative, a pilgrimage to the ends of the earth so that I might know both the planet and myself better.”

To these ends (literally), Wosk has traveled to both the north and the south poles. His reflections on being – within a little more than a year of each other – at the figurative top and bottom of the planet, lead to fascinating metaphysical contemplations. He is also provoked to contest mundane assumptions when he sees, at the South Pole, an upside-down globe. Why, he realizes he has never contemplated, should north be on top?

Wosk does not just see stuff, or even experience it, like an ordinary traveler, but finds himself transported beyond even the remote locales he visits to some supernatural planes. Near the North Pole, for example, he alarms travel-mates by laying down, albeit densely insulated, on the frozen Arctic ground “like some marooned sapien seal.” Becoming one with the planet’s most northerly extremity, he recalls, “I was seized by this unanticipated epiphany of transcendent unity.”

The intensity with which he lives the places he encounters makes for a fascinating read and those of us who lack his depth of connection with the ethereal may feel pangs of jealousy, if not inferiority, at failing to experience as profoundly.

He visits Venice, the birthplace of Marco Polo – well, one of the reputed birthplaces – and finds resolve from the “Master of Travelers, the one who dared.” But Venice, as magnificent as it is, seems to be among the least remarkable of Wosk’s destinations.

“I have explored caves and caverns in Israel, Thailand and deep within the Rock of Gibraltar where Neanderthals lived for over 100,000 years, and also entered the coastal caves along the cerulean Na Pali coast in Kauai,” he writes. “Gazing into the luminous waters of the Blue Grotto in Capri, one of the most enchanting islands on the planet, one senses its womb of wonders.”

Claustrophobia is a recurring theme (for the reader, if less so the writer), with reminiscences of crawling on his back into a sarcophagus, descending into the bowels of a Soviet-era nuclear-powered Arctic icebreaker, or meditating (naked) in the subterranean hollows of the pyramid that gives the book its title. The book is deeply personal, including revealing insights into his deepest thoughts, as well as the sorts of travel nightmares to which anyone can relate, such as being stuck together with a sulky travel companion who he had considered a potential love interest, but who turns out to be the roommate from hell. He seems to recognize that his well-intentioned psychoanalyzing of her behaviour may not have been the remedy he had hoped.

His sense of being an outsider is not merely social but otherworldly.

“I have always felt like a fool, somewhat awkward in an unfamiliar world – as if I have just awakened from a distant dream and been planted, like Adam, in a strange Garden of Gaia. I spent most of my life as an unrepentant pilgrim, exploring often exotic and embarrassing sensations of mind, body and soul.”

He openly admits that some of these sensations are enhanced by herbal or chemical assistance.

“On a beach off the road from Pafos to Limassol, in southern Cyprus, a friend and I took LSD at the fabled birthplace of Aphrodite,” he writes. “The beach was gravel and the waters rough but as the long, foaming waters born of the massive surf around the Rock reached the shore, one could easily imagine the earth being impregnated by the semen-bubbled surf and picture the goddess of love emerging from the sea.”

The book is about travel, but Wosk also covers voyages more broadly defined, such as the process of moving through life itself, including the reflection that a great rabbi imparted to him.

“One of my teachers, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, used to tell us that you don’t have to wait until you’re dead to die; that one can be involved in a succession of deaths and rebirths, that there is non-mortal death and resurrection while still alive,” writes Wosk.

In a harrowing experience while illicitly climbing the Egyptian pyramid of the title, he seems to have exactly this sort of non-mortal death, which may well have been entirely mortal had things turned any further awry.

Wosk has rubbed shoulders (or, more accurately, minds) with greats like Buckminster Fuller, Marshall McLuhan and Joseph Campbell. He worked at the right hand of Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel as his teaching assistant and calls the late humanitarian author “one of the most influential mentors in my life.”

If Wosk sometimes seems a figure remote from the ordinary human, he yanks himself back down to earth in numerous segments, such as explaining how he overcame his intimidation at applying for Harvard’s divinity school. He eventually conquers his

resistance and completes the graduate school application in the mechanic's anteroom while his car is being serviced nearby. Even by the standards of a vegetarian, which he is, Wosk's culinary tastes are decidedly and literally down to earth. (Favourite food? The potato.)

He refers modestly to his extensive philanthropy, which includes the Beit Wosk Community Centre, in Ashkelon, Israel, and the Dena Wosk School of Performing Arts at the Jewish Community Centre of Greater Vancouver (named for his late mother), but elides hundreds of other contributions over the years.

He pays tribute to his late father Morris ("MJ") and late uncle Ben, who arrived as children in this country. The brothers did odd jobs before starting a business collecting and repairing used pots and pans, which they shined up and sold around town using a horse and buggy. From this, they graduated to a storefront and later a furniture chain. Eventually, the brothers reshaped the city's skyline with some of Vancouver's most recognizable high-rise residential towers. To say the family came a long way from rural Ukraine is an understatement. MJ Wosk is estimated to have donated \$50 million to a variety of causes.

It is difficult to sum up this book as this or that genre. While one section is an extended poem, much of the rest reads as prose poetry. Moreover, it is travel journal, philosophy treatise, theological tract and memoir of a person who curates and collects not just fascinating objects (which he does) but ideas, experiences and memories. Perhaps the book could be best described as an exhibition, a retrospective of a just a few of the intangible treasures Wosk has amassed in a lifetime that seems more unique than every life, by definition, is.

As fellow thinker John Ralston Saul said of this book, “He brings us a life intensely lived.” To appreciate how intensely, one really needs to immerse oneself in these pages.

– *Pat Johnson*