



Booking Contact:

Clemence Taillandier, Zeitgeist Films
201-736-0261 • clemence@zeitgeistfilms.com

Marketing Contact:

Ben Crossley-Marra, Zeitgeist Films
212-274-1989 • ben@zeitgeistfilms.com

New York and National Publicity Contact:

Gary Springer, Springer Associates PR
212.354.4660 (o) 914.659.4802 (m) • gary@springerassociatespr.com

Los Angeles Publicity Contact:

Sasha Berman, Shotwell Media
310-450-5571 • sashaberman@mac.com

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Koch

A film by Neil Barsky

Former Mayor Ed Koch is the quintessential New Yorker. Still ferocious, charismatic, and hilariously blunt, the now 88-year-old Koch ruled New York from 1978 to 1989—a down-and-dirty decade of grit, graffiti, near-bankruptcy and rampant crime. First-time filmmaker (and former *Wall Street Journal* reporter) Neil Barsky has crafted an intimate and revealing portrait of this intensely private man, his legacy as a political titan, and the town he helped transform. The tumult of his three terms included a fiercely competitive 1977 election; an infamous 1980 transit strike; the burgeoning AIDS epidemic; landmark housing renewal initiatives; and an irreparable municipal corruption scandal. Through candid interviews and rare archival footage, *Koch* thrillingly chronicles the personal and political toll of running the world's most wondrous city in a time of upheaval and reinvention.

LONG SYNOPSIS

“Here was a guy who really represented the rough and tumble of New York. And he was just haunted and damned by one helluva personality.” —Rev. Calvin Butts

Three-time New York City Mayor (1978–1989) Ed Koch is combative, funny and blunt. He is also intensely private. In *Koch*, first-time filmmaker Neil Barsky gives us a contemporary history of the world's greatest city, and an intimate portrait of the 87-year-old former mayor, as he confronts his own mortality and legacy. The film examines issues still relevant today—race relations, homelessness, AIDS and gay rights—and provides a window into the trials and tribulations of the nation's most famous mayor in the world's most wondrous city.

Through candid and colorful interviews, rare archival footage and photographs, and verité footage, this new documentary takes the viewer on a journey back to a time when the city was beset by near-bankruptcy, high crime, graffiti and collective depression. It chronicles how Ed Koch gave the city its morale back, while engaging in exhausting confrontations with his critics.

Koch begins in the late 1970s, when New York was on the precipice of bankruptcy, dependent on the state and federal governments for its survival. Ed Koch is the master of street politics, and we watch him transform himself from a little-known liberal Congressman to a law-and-order mayoral candidate who cut deals with key constituencies to defeat the better-known Mario Cuomo. Joining his 1977 campaign was also Bess Meyerson, the former Miss America whose constant companionship during that campaign helped mute whispered rumors that Koch was gay.

Koch follows the mayor as he restores New York's fiscal health and rallies New Yorkers on the city's bridges during the infamous 1980 subway strike, only to embark on a racially divisive decision to close down Harlem's Sydenham Hospital. Koch rises to become “America's Mayor” and see him defeated as his third term becomes mired in a municipal corruption scandal.

The film also delves into deeply personal issues, and examines the complex relationship Ed Koch has with his own identity and family. A lifetime bachelor who has always lived alone, we observe the mayor hounded by rumors of his personal life, and hear him explain in poignant detail why he has chosen to keep the details of his personal life private.

Koch is a portrait of a lion in winter as the onetime celebrity strains to remain in the spotlight. We watch the former mayor glad-hand at campaign stops, hobnob with political well-wishers on election night, appear on television and radio and speak in front of small groups. He puts on a stiff upper lip as he is snubbed by Andrew Cuomo, son of his bête noir Mario Cuomo, on election night. We see his spirits brighten at his Gracie Mansion birthday party when Mayor Bloomberg announces the renaming of the Queensboro Bridge in his honor. By the end, we come to realize that while Koch is mortal like the rest of us and cannot overcome the inevitability of old age, he will “fight the fight” to the end. Asked what, at 86, he still wants out of life, he answers plainly: “More. Better.”

The documentary is beautifully filmed in high-definition and filled with New York characters and life on the street. As we come to understand how the seeds of New York City's recovery were planted in his administration, Ed Koch emerges as the quintessential New Yorker—embattled and unapologetic. And while he is a man in many ways alone, viewers will come to see and hear what an enormous historical impact he had on the city.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Making a documentary about Ed Koch was an easy call. To this day, I cannot think of a New Yorker as popular or as polarizing. Ed Koch's story is in many ways the story of the city.

I was born in the Bronx in 1958 and moved to the suburbs when I was four. When I returned to the city to attend the Walden School on Manhattan's Upper West Side, I was like a freed bird. New York in those days was dangerous, dirty and utterly dysfunctional; it was also magical. For most of Koch's mayoralty (1978–1989), I was either a student or a young reporter, and I would have given a kidney to cover City Hall for one of the city's major newspapers. It was not to be; and on some level this film is my way of making up for the lost opportunity.

Koch proved a perfectly complex character. He is funny and he can be a bully; he is charming and also narcissistic. He has a much-speculated-about private life which he doesn't mind being asked about, so long as you don't mind being told to mind your own business. He is a man surrounded by friends and admirers, and he is a man alone.

Once we started shooting the film, it became clear just how personally compelling Koch—now 87—still is. He tirelessly hopped from campaign stop to campaign stop, from speaking engagement to engagement. He bared his teeth at anyone who challenged him in a public forum; he still shined brightly when he was the center of attention. And he cannot walk down a New York City street without being approached by an admirer.

Shooting the film went relatively smoothly. I had an ace director of photography in Tom Hurwitz, a relentless perfectionist who fearlessly kept his camera as close to Koch as possible, literally and figuratively. Thanks to my journalism background, I was relatively comfortable doing research and conducting interviews. With the exception of one former governor and one former mayor, virtually everyone we reached out to agreed to be interviewed. Koch's family and friends opened their homes and their photo scrapbooks to us.

Editing the movie was a bit more challenging. *Koch* is my first film, and while I was fairly confident of the movie I wanted to make, I simply lacked the tools to make it. Thank God for film editors. Juliet Weber spent a month looking at our hundreds of hours of footage and gave the film its structure, pacing and ultimately its poignancy. She demanded a huge amount of creative freedom, and I'm glad I gave it to her.

Documentary subjects, particularly famous ones, can be difficult. In almost every case I am aware of, the main subjects keep certain subjects off limits, or burden the filmmaker with demands that effectively give them control of the film. From the day his indispensable Chief of Staff Diane Coffey arranged our first meeting, Ed Koch gave me free rein. When I broached the subject of his sexuality over dinner the night before a shoot, he said simply "Ask me anything." His only condition was that he see a cut of the film so he could suggest changes. When I refused to show him a cut until the very end of the process, Koch was angered, and for a few months we stopped speaking. Once he saw the film, he did not ask for a single change—despite getting roughed up in several scenes.

After a recent screening, a friend asked me to tell him just how one does make a movie. As we approach the end of this two+ year adventure, I would say now the key to making a good movie is to find a subject you're passionate about, and then go out and hire Jenny Carchman to produce it for you. The filmmaking process rarely turns out as planned, and ours was no exception. There were delays, there were arguments and there was some staff turnover. Jenny held it all together, and was a true partner in every facet of the film.

From World War II and until only recently, it was almost an article of faith that the United States' big northern cities only deteriorated; they could never get better. Somehow, New York City defied that trend, and it did so I think because it kept itself open—to immigrants, to businesses, to artists and to poets. In my view, the very imperfect Ed Koch intuitively understood what made New York special, and I believe he is as responsible for the New York City of today as anyone alive.

–Neil Barsky

ED KOCH

Born in 1924, Edward Irving Koch was elected the 105th Mayor of New York City in 1977. Born in the Bronx of Polish-Jewish ancestry, Koch's family moved to Newark, New Jersey, during the Depression and later moved to Ocean Parkway, Brooklyn, when he was a teenager. He left City College when he was drafted into the Army, where he became a decorated combat infantryman, achieving the rank of sergeant. He received his law degree from New York University Law School in 1948. As an active member of a Manhattan reform club, and the Greenwich Village Independent Democrats, Koch ran successfully for district leader in 1963 against Carmine DeSapio. Koch was reelected in 1965 and elected to the City Council the following year.

In 1968, Koch was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in a district that hadn't sent a Democrat to Congress since 1934. He was reelected four times, earning a reputation as a competent legislator and a champion of many social causes. In 1977, he sought the Democratic nomination for mayor among a crowded field of candidates. Koch won the primary and went on to defeat Liberal Party candidate Mario Cuomo in the general election. Described in the infancy of his mayoralty as a shy and retiring man, Koch used his inauguration to send New Yorkers a message of redemption: "These have been hard times. We have been drawn across the knife-edge of poverty. We have been shaken by troubles that would have destroyed any other city. But we are not any other city. We are the city of New York and New York in adversity towers above any other city in the world."

With New York City's treasury near empty, Koch restored the city's credit in his first term through a series of budget cutting measures, enabling the city to enter the bond market within a few years and raise capital funds. As the city's fiscal prognosis began to brighten, so too did the mood of New Yorkers. The characterization of Koch as low key was soon revised after he took office, with his ebullient personality, and his trademark greeting, "How I'm Doin'." Under Koch, the city's annual budget doubled to \$26 billion and approximately \$19 billion was spent on capital projects in the 1980s.

Koch, who vowed to be the first four term mayor, sought reelection in 1989. However, he was confronted with a series of government corruption scandals. He also faced heated criticism for his combative dealings with other public officials and the press. He lost the Democratic primary to then Manhattan Borough President David Dinkins.

He has remained extremely active and popular since leaving office, practicing law in New York City, lecturing, authoring books, serving as a newspaper columnist, hosting his own radio show, serving as a judge on the popular TV show *The People's Court*, and writing movie reviews.

THE FILMMAKERS

Director, Neil Barsky

Koch is Neil Barsky's first documentary film. Neil began his career as a newspaper reporter, and covered real estate and economic development for the *New York Daily News* and the *Wall Street Journal*. He subsequently became a Wall Street analyst and hedge fund manager. He is a graduate of Oberlin College and the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. He sits on the board of trustees of Oberlin College and the board of directors of Youth Communication, and is chair of the Columbia Journalism Review board of overseers. He lives in Manhattan with his wife and two children.

Producer, Jenny Carchman

Jenny Carchman has made documentaries for both theatrical release and broadcast television including programming for PBS's *Frontline*, *American Masters*, *American Experience* and HBO. For several years, Jenny has helped produce documentary films for Academy-Award winning director Martin Scorsese (*Public Speaking*; *George Harrison: Living in the Material World*). She recently directed the HBO documentary *One Nation Under Dog*, which was an official selection of the 2012 Tribeca Film Festival and the Hamptons Film Festival. In addition to producing and directing films, Carchman serves on the board of directors of the Ghetto Film School, which teaches filmmaking to teenagers in the Bronx. She lives with her husband and two children in New York City.

Editor, Juliet Weber

Juliet Weber has worked on numerous feature documentaries including: *Inventing Our Life: the Kibbutz Experiment*; *Monseñor: The Last Journey of Oscar Romero* (as editor & co-director); *Mr. Conservative: Goldwater on Goldwater*; *Unchained Memories: Readings from the Slave Narratives* (as editor & co-producer); *Fastpitch*, (as editor and co-director); *A Rape in a Small Town* (Emmy nomination for editing); and *The Restless Conscience* (Academy Award nomination).

Co-Producer, Lindsey Megrue

Lindsey Megrue began her career in documentary film and television in 2004. She has since worked on numerous critically acclaimed programs for PBS and HBO, including five episodes of the award-winning PBS series *American Experience*. She directed her first short film in 2011, which premiered at the New York Surf Film Festival and Coney Island Film Festival.

Associate Producer, Amilca Palmer

Amilca Palmer has co-produced and associate produced numerous award-winning documentaries. Her credits include *This Emotional Life* for the PBS science series NOVA; the celebrated *African American Lives* and *African American Lives II* series with Henry Louis Gates, Jr.; the *American Masters* documentary *Sweet Honey in the Rock: Raise Your Voice*; and *The Murder of Emmett Till* for PBS's *American Experience*, which won the 2003 Sundance Special Jury Prize and was awarded a Peabody and Primetime Emmy. She was the Director of Archival Research for the *American Masters* documentary *LENNONYC*, winner of a 2010 Peabody Award. Palmer wrote and produced her first documentary short, *Daughters of Dykes*, while at Brown University.

Assistant Editor, Laura Madden

Laura Madden began her career in documentary film production at Middlemarch Films, where she and her team won an Emmy for the PBS miniseries *Benjamin Franklin*. She has assistant edited numerous independent documentary films, including *Twisted: A Ballonamentary*, which was an official selection at SXSW. Fluent in three languages, Madden has worked all over the world as a journalist and photographer. She splits her time between New York City, Srinagar (India) and Natal (Brazil).

Production Associate, Annie Salsich

Annie Salsich graduated from Barnard College in 2010 with a B.A. in History. She conducted research as an intern for two Martin Scorsese documentaries, *Public Speaking* and *George Harrison: Living in the Material World*. Prior to pursuing documentary film, she interned for art editor Françoise Mouly at *The New Yorker*. Salsich lives in Brooklyn and practices improv comedy with fellow students of the Upright Citizens Brigade.

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Associate Producer
Amilca Palmer

Production Associate
Annie Salsich

Executive Producers
Neil Barsky
Joan S. Davidson

USA • 2012 • 95 mins • Color • Digital • In English
Aspect ratio: 1.78:1 • Sound: 5.1 Dolby SRD



A ZEITGEIST FILMS RELEASE

247 Centre St, 2nd fl.
New York, NY 10013

p 212.274.1989 • f 212.274.1644
www.zeitgeistfilms.com

The New York Times

October 13, 2012

Convening an Algonquin Table at Koch's Place



Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

At a recent gathering, the talk turned to lunch and regulars, from left, Tom Baer, George Arzt, John LoCicero, former Mayor Edward I. Koch and Henry J. Stern, moved their conversation to a restaurant.

By SAM ROBERTS

Slouching in a club chair with his left leg draped over the arm, [Edward I. Koch](#) shared an anecdote. Not surprisingly, it was about him. But Mr. Koch is always an engaging storyteller. And what made this one special was that the half-dozen friends and former colleagues assembled in his Greenwich Village living room had never heard it before.



Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

Mr. Koch recently hosted another meeting of friends and former colleagues - his some 2,300th across many homes since the 1960s - at his apartment in Greenwich Village.

That seems hard to fathom because this was about the 2,300th Saturday gathering Mr. Koch had hosted and the only thing harder to come by than original conversation is consensus.

"We now refer to stories by number," Mr. Koch said.

Over the years, the group of men who have convened almost every weekend at Mr. Koch's place has evolved into a jaunty merger of "Crossfire" and "Old Jews Telling Jokes." Disagreements are common, sometimes over weighty topics and sometimes over not so weighty ones.

“There’s never been a Saturday when we didn’t argue about where we’re going to have lunch,” said Peter Ashkenazy, a retired city commissioner and restaurateur, who, with Mr. Koch and Dan Wolf, the founding editor of *The Village Voice* who died in 1996, originated the group.

Mr. Koch has been presiding over these Saturday round tables since the mid-1960s, first, as a city councilman and then as a congressman, at his old apartment on Washington Place, then, as mayor, at Gracie Mansion and now, as a vocal private citizen, in his 16th-floor living room on Fifth Avenue.

“The only thing that rivals us must be a crap game somewhere in the city,” Mr. Koch said.

The anecdote Mr. Koch shared on this recent Saturday was original because the subject had unfolded just the day before. Sheldon Adelson, the billionaire gambling mogul and bankroller of conservative political causes, had invited himself to Mr. Koch’s law office. “His opening line was, ‘People have told me you’re the only person in the world that can elect Romney in Florida,’” Mr. Koch said.

“I said: ‘Don’t be ridiculous. It is not true,’” he added. “I wanted to say, ‘Well maybe it’s partially true.’”

“You’re always modest,” said John LoCicero, an old friend and a political adviser.

Mr. Koch says he steadfastly supports President Obama because he differs with Mitt Romney’s position on many major domestic and social issues. But Mr. Koch, who is 87 and walks with a cane, said he begged off campaigning personally for the president in Florida. “I told them my doctor told me I’m too fragile,” he said. “And I don’t want to wind up in a hospital there that has only old people.”

Tom Baer, an entertainment lawyer and a former prosecutor, volunteered that he had been briefed on the meeting with Mr. Adelson by a mutual friend, who had asked: “Do you think Ed would possibly ever change his mind? Who do you think would make a call to him that at least gets him thinking?”

“I said Mitt Romney,” Mr. Baer recalled.

Mr. Koch, wearing a checked shirt and olive-colored slacks, sipped from a can of Coke. A lonely dish of cashews sat on a coffee table. The dining room table was peppered with prescription pill bottles. A beeping smoke alarm pleaded for a battery.

The décor includes a print by Frank Stella (“he brought this as a dinner gift years ago”), framed Christmas cards by Richard Anuskiewicz (“I couldn’t afford any of his paintings”), and several Barcelona chairs designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (“these are real, they are registered!”).

The conversation moved along a well-trod memory lane, like the night Mr. Koch answered the front door of Gracie Mansion to find a disheveled man asking for the mayor and replied, “He’s busy.” And the time his police commissioner, fearing a terrorist attack, had a panic room installed in the mansion’s second floor bathroom complete with a loaded gun in a locked medicine cabinet (Mr. Koch derided the gesture, suggesting that if he were indeed panicked he would probably forget the lock’s combination).

By 1:25 p.m., about an hour after the group had convened, the conversation turned to lunch. This debate, too, was predictable.

Typically, Mr. LoCicero, favors bagels and lox. Peter A. Piscitelli, a former city lobbyist, usually prefers the Peking Duck House. Someone suggested Aqua Grill, which is relatively close. Mr. Koch made the call.

On this particular Saturday, the group included two other regulars, Henry J. Stern, a former parks commissioner, and [George Arzt](#), Mr. Koch's former press secretary and now a political consultant. Most of the newer members of this guys-who-lunch group are in their 70s or 80s, which makes them no less loquacious — just harder to hear.

The men fill a table at Aqua Grill. Mr. Koch ordered the usual — “they don't have it on the menu,” he told a waiter, “but they always make it for me: tomato, avocado and onion and some sort of sauce.” When the ingredients arrived separately instead of mixed, the usual way, he politely sent it back for repairs.

A reporter invited to tag along asked how his presence changed the conversation. The consensus was that the dialogue, already sprinkled with expletives, would have been even saltier and that Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo and Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg would have not have escaped scot-free.

Saturday in the banquette with Ed is like an episode of “The Bickersons.” Groupthink does not intrude. Irreverence abounds. The regulars rarely defer to the former mayor and have spent so much time together that they finish one another's sentences.

“I'll have a seeded bagel,” Mr. Koch said. The waiter asked what kind.

“Sesame,” Mr. LoCicero said.

“I don't think the debates —” Mr. Koch began.

“Mean much,” Mr. LoCicero interjected.

When Mr. Koch recounted his appointment of a judge, Mr. LoCicero interrupted: “Ed, you've got two stories mixed up.”

Mr. Koch recalled almost endorsing two candidates for the same office. Now, he said, “I make no commitments until I get John's opinion,” referring to Mr. LoCicero.

“And then disregards it,” Mr. Arzt added.

By 3:15, the small platters of complementary desserts had been consumed. The group customarily splits the check. Mr. Koch gives Mr. LoCicero a lift home to the Upper West Side in his leased, chauffeured Toyota Avalon. Then he goes home to Greenwich Village to take a nap.