

**BUBBY DOESN'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE:
SEARCH FOR IDENTITY AND CONTINUITY ON THE LOWER EAST SIDE**

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ELDRIDGE STREET BELOW CANAL IS A NARROW URBAN RIBBON OF RESIDENTIAL AND COMMERCIAL ACTIVITY. The houses are old tenements, relics of the closing decades of the nineteenth century, victims of years of overcrowding and neglect. Sometimes, I think they remain standing five stories tall and erect simply because they do not have the strength to fall.

Buddhist monks, in grey robes and trousers that flair at the waist and taper at the knee, rush in and out of a small storefront. A sign, almost inconspicuous, identifies the building as a temple. A narrow cornice stretches midway across the building suggesting a pagoda. The sanctuary is dimly lit by rows of thick candles. Enter and pass a small ornate cupboard that looks more like a curio cabinet than an altar to my Western perspective. It displays presentation bowls of fruit, flowers and incense sticks, offerings of the faithful. In the rear, a few rows of folding chairs face a statue of Buddha in traditional pose.

Next door, a restaurant with no visible name that squeezes four small tables into a tiny space feeds a steady stream of young men. There are six other restaurants, similarly undistinguished in size and décor, along the street. The numerous drivers who wait for calls in front of two car service storefronts and neighborhood day laborers crowd each of them. I am always that surprised that four hairstylist shops and two computer supply shops successfully compete for clients. Most of the businesses advertise international money transfer services. Observant street watchers notice a methadone clinic above a 99-cent variety store. The clinic's dispirited clients who congregate in front of the entrance are a stark contrast to the lively pedestrian traffic that moves up and down the street.

Waves of red, gold and green flags, banners and script, colors of good fortune, are ubiquitous. At the corner, the bridge to Brooklyn rises over produce stands of bok choy, scallions, lychee nuts and cabbage along side women waving tickets who direct passengers to a line of busses headed to Chinatowns in other cities. Vendors and customers converse in several dialects of Chinese. Fukinese speakers are the most recently arrived. Clearly Chinatown has expanded its traditional boundaries to the east of the Bowery including Eldridge Street and the iconic area of Jewish migration and early settlement – the Lower East Side.

On breezy spring days and in the fall, tourists frequently visit Eldridge Street. They are not stragglers from Chinatown proper but Jews searching for a residue of the past Jewish community on this vibrant street of recent immigrants. At number 12, architects with blueprints, historians with faded newspaper articles and oral histories, artists and craftspeople meet to discuss the final stages of an almost twenty-year effort to preserve and restore *Chevre Anshe Jeshuran ein Lubz*, the Eldridge Street Synagogue – the first synagogue built by east European Jews in 1887. Less known is the Star of David mosaic tile floor on the second floor of the tenement across the street, or Eddie Cantor's childhood home, or Ira Gershwin's birthplace, or the first meeting site of the *Arbeiter Ring*, or Workmen's Circle, up the block.

ON ELDRIDGE STREET, LAYERS OF IMMIGRATION AND ETHNIC HISTORY PILE UPON EACH OTHER, not unlike geological formations of fossil and rock. I do not know when the first Jewish immigrants settled on Eldridge Street. They may have come among the early *Kleine Deutschland* arrivals, more likely in the early 1880's. The May Laws inspired by Tzar Alexander III which imposed political repression, encouraged pogroms, and the absence of economic opportunity and scant expectation of future amelioration spurred emigration. New York City's Jewish population of 1879 expanded tenfold within thirty years and reached two million following World War I.

As a docent educator at the Eldridge Street Synagogue and a New York City tour guide and urban historian, I regularly engage these tourists. It appears to me – without application of standard demographic research techniques – that the early baby boomers, those born after World War II, living outside of the City –

arrive with a particular cultural, historical and geographic focus. As they walk among the old buildings, imagining scenes evoked by my narrative, they are seeking a connection to past Jewish culture that provided the impetus for the present vitality and accomplishments that distinguish American Jewry. Jeffrey Shandler, Yiddish linguist and historian refers to such journeys as searching for an "imagined realm". Some visitors reveal, on a more personal level, that the combination of space, structure and narrative inspires a sense of personal renewal and purpose. I am reminded of the title of literary scholar David Roskies's book, *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past*.

I have also met tourists who seek more remote Jewish origins; they confuse eastern European *shtetlach* with the Lower East Side. They surprise me with statements, such as, "My parents were born in this *shtetl*" or "I can't believe I'm in my grandfather's *shtetl*." Or, questions, such as, "Where can I buy a herring in a barrel, like in the *shtetl*?" or, "Where is the Clinton Street *shtetl*?" Historian Jenna Joselit refers to explorers visiting similar sites as seekers of an "equivalent of the *shtetl*." Some baby boomers express disappointment to find that the Lower East Side of 2007 is not their *bubby's* neighborhood and never was her *shtetl*.

Shtetl, the diminutive of *shtot*, or city, refers to the small towns that peppered the eastern European landscape. Many were primarily Jewish, in others Jews were a minority. The popular conception of *shtetl* is frequently a singular, limited and lachrymose vision as a settlement frozen in time, untouched by the encroachments of modernity and change. In fact *shtetlach* varied, influenced by nationality – Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, Baltic, and Roumanian – language, natural resources, industry and economic opportunity, size, relations between co-territorialists, Christian religious practices and proximity to large cities. Sports clubs, political organizations, secular, Yiddish and Hebrew schools, drama societies, and libraries were not unusual in the larger towns. Recall that even Teyve of *Fiddler on the Roof* fame, the eastern European prototype traditional father, encountered modernity's sting as it entered the *shtetl*. What *shtetlach* did have in common were their eastern European origins, Yiddish as the primary language of Jews (at least until the 1930's), religion, and social structures such as *chevre* – the *chevra kadisha*, charity organizations, tradesmen's societies, and the like. True, the Lower East Side was heavily populated by Jews, many foreign born, heavily Yiddish-speaking (as an aside, one commentator reports that Yiddish speaking immigrants spoke more English one hundred years ago than their descendants speak Yiddish today), and heavily influenced by the *shtetl* past.

Certainly, there was a nostalgia for *der alte heim*, the old home, demonstrated by the popularity of Yiddish show tunes such as *Belz*, *Mein Shtete Belz*, an elegiac recalling childhood in the *shtetl* or *Ich Vil Tzurik Aheim*, (I Want To Return Home) and sepia photo sections of *shtetl* types memorialized by the Forward. Still, most immigrants did not look back and few returned. Immigrants, following a day of work and on the weekends, attended classes in civics and English language, preparatory to citizenship and the general life of New York City. Ballroom dance instruction classes and informal social clubs attracted younger folk but religious education classes and synagogue attendance dwindled. Life in the street and the home was shaped by American ideals and aspirations. Looking forward to the future, Lower East Siders attempted to create a Jewish American identity that encouraged adaptation and acculturation. The *shtetl* would persist as memory only.

A SUCCESSFUL HISTORICAL TOUR EVOKES IMAGES AND STIMULATES PARTICIPANT IMAGINATION. EXTANT BUILDINGS ARE POWERFUL TOUR GUIDE TOOLS. On East Broadway, once referred to as the Yiddish Newspaper Row, the Forward building, past home of the premier Yiddish newspaper, once announced its name in tall gold letters above profiles of prominent socialist personalities; it is now being converted to condos. The more conservative *Der Tog* and *Morgan Zjournal* discontinued publication many years ago. At the corner, the Garden Cafeteria where the anonymous Lead Pencil and other Yiddish journalists gathered for lunch is a storefront Chinese restaurant. Who knows who lives in the apartments above, once occupied by Trotsky and other radicals? Rabbi Jacob Joseph Yeshiva High School, the "Mother of all Yeshivas" around the corner was converted to condos a few years ago.

The Aguilar Library, privately funded by uptown German Jews, was open twelve hours daily in its day, and scores of East Siders would wait in line to retrieve the precious key to education. Today it is a branch of the New York Public Library. The shelves in the foreign language section, which previously stacked a thick

collection of Yiddish books, are lined with Chinese texts. The Educational Alliance, where Eddie Cantor first performed and Arthur Murray made his first hesitant dance steps, and the Henry Street Settlement continue to service the neighborhood's health, educational and social needs, but most of its recipients are not Jewish. The headquarters of HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, left the neighborhood when the surge of Jewish immigrants diminished. Synagogues, grand and small, that dotted the neighborhood are gone. Congregation *Bet Medresh Hagadol*, the physically deteriorating former pulpit of Jacob Joseph, Chief Rabbi of New York, awaits an uncertain future. The Kletzker Benevolent Society building, once home to scores of *landsleit* societies— benevolent organizations established by former residents of the same town — is now a funeral parlor. The street level of Jarmulovsky's bank is a restaurant, garment factories occupy the floors above. The Yiddish theatres on Second Avenue that entertained the masses with melodramas and highbrow interpretations of Shakespeare and Ibsen disappeared as immigrants learned English and absorbed mainstream culture.

By the mid 1920's the Lower East Side's Jazz Age children moved uptown, to the Bronx or Brooklyn, some to Queens. By the 1930's the Lower East Side's population was primarily elderly and ravaged by the Great Depression. At present, there is still a Jewish presence, mostly along Grand Street to the East River. The Bialystoker Synagogue offers four daily *minyons* to accommodate daily worshippers alongside a few other synagogues. A scribe and two ritual object stores are the last vestiges of a long line of stores along Essex Street. If you consider pickles as Jewish, Guss and the Pickle Boys are available. A kosher deli (which most tourists pass on their way to non-kosher Katz's) and an Israeli-style pizza restaurant are the kosher options. A kosher take-out manages to hang on. The bialy store does a brisk business. Schapiro Wine has been reduced to a small stall in the Essex Street Market, and Ratners baked it last blintz several years ago. A final example of the deconstruction of the Lower East Side is the renaming of the soon to be reopened Eldridge Street Synagogue. While religious services will continue, the site will be called The Museum on Eldridge Street.

IF YOU HAVE NOT BEEN TO THE LOWER EAST SIDE RECENTLY, RUN TO THE SUBWAY NOW. I am there at least twice a week and each time I am startled by a new change. The dynamic tension of the early settlement era is being replayed. Recently arrived residents are immigrants from other areas of the city. Housing development proceeds at heady speed. Trendy restaurants replace bodegas, cafes featuring designer coffee blends have opened in vacant storefronts. A faded linen shop is now an art gallery, a fourth hotel will open shortly and lines at the Sunshine, a multi-screen movie theater, are not uncommon. Preservationists and developers meet separately and then confront each other in bitter argument, each side proposing a different vision for the Lower East Side. Venerable sites are gradually crumbling or traded in the real estate market. The weakened infrastructure of the Roumanian Synagogue, reputed to have among the best acoustics in the city and once a preferred venue of many cantors, fell last year. The upper floors of the Young Israel synagogue — the first Young Israel in New York City, which also housed the first offices of HIAS — to will be razed to accommodate a condo. High-rise residences, with glass skins, shriek above the remaining tenements. The Lower East Side's distinction as a low-rise Manhattan neighborhood will soon be remembered only in photographic essays. The East Village youth culture and night life has clearly moved south to the northwestern streets of the Lower East Side, stripping the neighborhood of its last vestiges of the immigrant life that the baby boomers imagined. Institutions like the Tenement Museum, which has preserved a Civil War tenement on Orchard Street and restored several apartments, will continue to offer insight to the immigrant experience. The concern, however, is that it will remain one of a few texts without contexture: a lone building without a frame of reference.

Standing on the steps of the Eldridge Street Synagogue, I wonder if the grandchildren of the children presently hurrying to school will return to search for the restaurants, temple and community institutions that the children pass as they head to school. The need for identity and continuity is common to all ethnic groups. It may be that China, unlike the eastern European Pale of Settlement, may continue to send immigrants to New York for years, reinforcing old world traditions. But will they settle on Eldridge Street? Will bok choy become the equivalent of stuffed derma, frequently savored in culinary memory but rarely consumed? I suspect that like the four dialects of Yiddish, the language of Eldridge Street past, Mandarin, Cantonese and Fukinese will be silent. It is likely that the Chinese equivalent to the Jewish baby boomers will return to Eldridge Street and find that the past persists only in memory.