



Photo courtesy of Katz's Deli, photographer unknown

The Lower East Side:

Fading into Jewish History

By Hillel Kuttler



New York — A tan brick wall anchors the northern section of the Seward Park apartment complex and its namesake playground on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Eight feet up the wall, outside what once was Sinsheimer's Café, a plaque commemorates "the site—60 Essex Street—where B'nai B'rith, the first national service organization created in the United States, was founded on October 13, 1843."

Four blocks south, a placard in a Catholic churchyard at the corner of Rutgers and Henry streets notes that building's mid-19th century Protestant origins. "You're always walking in somebody's footsteps," it reads. "Who will walk in yours?"

The multi-denominational messages attest to the constancy of change in urban America. Jews might find such change hard to accept, though, on the Lower East Side, which each year is losing more of its Jewish character.

Just last summer, Abraham Stern accepted a multi-million-dollar offer for his Hester Street building, so he closed Gertel's, beloved for its rugelach and cookies for 94 years. "The feeling of having a place like the Lower East Side, which was the most populated Jewish area in New York, is gone," says Stern, who relocated his bake shop to Brooklyn. "It was a beautiful, historical neighborhood, and it's gone. There's not much left of it."

Kadouri and Sons, a dried-fruits-and-nuts store next door, also sold out and moved.

Preceding these landmarks were Ratner's and Shmulka Bernstein's, whose fresh onion rolls and Rumanian pastrami, respectively, seduced generations. And the spirits of waiters past surely hover with in-

creased surliness over the abandoned Grand Street Dairy Restaurant.

The Rabbi Jacob Joseph yeshiva at 165–167 Henry Street is now an apartment building, still topped by three engraved Stars of David. The *Jewish Daily Forward* newspaper no longer is published on East Broadway, although the Yiddish lettering remains on the original stone structure that housed it—now a condominium. Many former clothing shops along Orchard Street are now bars and nightclubs.

Time's passage demands keener powers of recollection to conjure the Jewish past. Nostalgia, however, doesn't pay the bills.

"The traditional customers who used to come in on a daily basis moved. They became younger. Chinatown encroached, too," says Neil Ovadia, whose family runs Kadouri and Sons. "Most of the business was on the weekend. It just didn't warrant keeping the store anymore."

The company has been in Ovadia's family since before his grandfather, Haim Kadouri, shifted it from Iraq to Israel and then, in the mid-1970s, to the Lower East Side. It now calls an industrial zone in the borough of Queens home and caters solely to wholesale customers. Ovadia still lives at 51 Hester Street, in the building where a clothing store replaced Kadouri's colorful bins of grains, dried fruit, nuts, spices, and candies.

As a resident, he likes the new Lower East Side. Although many of the retail businesses that provided a Jewish flavor have departed, worthy successors have arrived, he says.

"The neighborhood has changed, somewhat for the better. It's not the same Lower East Side it used to be, but I am happy to see other establishments of substance coming in," says Ovadia. "The Seward Park Playhouse has been re-established. There are wonderful ethnic restaurants in the neighborhood. You can get almost any type food you can imagine."

"The ethnicity helps re-establish what the Lower East Side was all about. It's nice to see that the Lower East Side is not just another corporate part of Manhattan."



On a windy Friday-after-Thanksgiving morning, clusters of tourists crisscross the neighborhood. They sample pickles and chew

on bialys, but mostly they listen intently.

At the corner of Essex and Hester streets, one guide displays for her group a black-and-white photograph of the area. It depicts the Lower East Side of yore: tenements from which fire escapes hang, carts of merchandise, horses, and wall-to-wall people. She asks them to consider the present-day vistas with the 110-year-old scene in mind.

The request is eminently doable. Much of the tenement stock remains, as do the fairly narrow streets. Yonah Schimmel's is the same dumpy place on Houston Street with out-of-this-world knishes as when it opened in 1910. Katz's Deli, of "When Harry Met Sally" fame, still operates a few doors down.

And as B'nai B'rith International Executive Vice President Daniel S. Mariaschin notes, the famous street names—Rivington, Chrystie, Ludlow, Norfolk, Broome, Eldridge, and, especially, Allen, where Mariaschin's great-grandfather lived briefly—remain as guideposts for Jewish visitors.

On the other hand, how can the Lower East Side maintain its hold on the Jewish soul when the number of Jews living there decreases and the institutions that once testified to the area's cultural richness vanish?

For American Jews, that question hits home—literally so—because the Lower East Side resonates like nowhere else in the country.

While Ellis Island represents the extension of freedom and opportunity, the Lower East Side stands for the harsh, but necessary, lower rung that set immigrants on the path to permanent settlement in the New World. Most American Jews can trace their roots to ancestors whose first steps in the United States led from Ellis Island to the nearby Lower East Side.

The neighborhood remains legendary in the mind's eye of even third- and fourth-generation American Jews. Say "tenement," "immigrant," or "sweatshop," and we imagine Grandpa dodging horses on Delancey Street on his way to work as a pushcart peddler on Hester Street or as a *sofer* (scribe) on Essex Street. For that reason, the Lower East Side is "more than a landmark," says Mariaschin. "It becomes a lodestone, so central to the American Jewish experience."

The Lower East Side, he adds, "was a lively center of Jewish life and an incubator for fu-



Photo by Yeva Dashevsky

The landmark Katz's Deli, of "When Harry Met Sally" fame, then and now.



The recently restored 122-year-old Eldridge Street Synagogue, now known as the Museum on Eldridge Street, is a beautiful testimonial to what once was.

Photo by Kate Milford

ture Jewish generations, many of whose sons and daughters became household names in American culture and business. There's been a long and continuous presence of Jews in that place: from 1820 to the present. That's a long run; almost the entire length of the [history of] the United States."

Hundreds of thousands of Jews lived in the area at its peak of 1890, when the 980 residents per acre made it "the most crowded place in the world [and] almost completely Jewish," according to area resident Lori Weissman, marketing coordinator for the Lower East Side Jewish Conservancy (LESJC). The 2000 census, she says, showed just 30,000 Jews there.

Some who remain also are concerned for the future of the neighborhood, but plan to stick it out. Lenny Zerling, who owns G&S

Sporting Goods, remembers when "you could get anything you wanted down here," when bridal, fabric, and linen shops lined Grand Street; haberdasheries dominated Orchard Street; and Judaica and book stores occupied Essex Street.

"When the bridal stores left, the linen stores left. When there were six bridal stores, you'd go from one to the next and shop," he says, interrupting to serve a young, black-hatted Jewish man searching for workout gloves. "Each place that left—it had an effect on the others. This happened over a period of 10–15 years."

Zerling grew up in the area and lives above his Essex Street shop, which his father Izzie founded in 1944. An Estonian immigrant who became a lightweight boxer, Izzie used to sew everything by hand. Today, the box-

ing gloves and speed bags that hang near the main counter are made in China. "Business stinks," off 25 percent last October compared to October 2007, Zerling says. "With the economy going into the sink hole, it's worse. It makes it tough to survive."

Why, then, is he still here?

Zerling shrugs. "Tradition," he says.

Tradition, indeed, has become the neighborhood's greatest Jewish industry. The apartment complexes along Grand Street, between Essex Street and the East River, remain occupied by many older Orthodox families. They are now being joined by other Jews who have been moving in ever since those co-op buildings went condo a few years back and prices skyrocketed. But

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the new arrivals tend to be younger, less-affiliated folks, more interested in hot, new restaurants than in Jewish history.

"The joke," says Weissman, "is that all the young people are dying to get a deal in the neighborhood that their immigrant ancestors

were dying to get out of."

That leaves much of the burden on culture-conscious visitors to sustain the Jewish life that remains.

To some extent, they're pulling their weight impressively. A reporter attempting to interview Rabbi Mordechai Blumenthal, owner of Torahs Plus Judaica, could not en-

ter the Essex Street store on this November morning because seven customers filled the cramped quarters.

A few steps north, Alan Kaufman extends a smile and a free taste at his Pickle Guys shop. Tours run by the Tenement Museum (around the corner on Orchard Street) and by LESJC are popular. The recently restored, 122-year-old Eldridge Street Synagogue, now known as the Museum on Eldridge Street, is a beautiful testimonial to what once was.


For now, the neighborhood effectively addresses residents' needs. A butcher shop, restaurants, bakeries, grocery stores, and synagogues cater to the observant population. Some wonder, though, how much longer that will continue.

Rabbi David Feinstein, dean of Mesivta Tifereth Yerushalayim, a yeshiva on East Broadway, cannot fathom the attachment many young Jews in the area have to "the American dream—that they have to have a house." He does not like the fact that so many are leaving.

"The old-timers are here and the [Orthodox-affiliated] youngsters are moving out," he says. "At the moment, we're still viable." But what if the area in which he says he's spent "nearly my whole life" becomes unsustainable for committed Jews like him?

"It doesn't bother me," Feinstein responds, without hesitating. "There's no holiness in the Lower East Side. As long as it exists, we have to service the population. If there's no population to service? Fine. We close down and move on. It's no 'must' that we have a Jewish population on the Lower East Side."

Kaufman begs to differ. He plans to stay put, no matter what—even if the landlord raises the rent on his tiny Essex Street shop when the lease comes up for renewal in three years.

"I'd like to stay because of tradition. If you lose the pickle store, the bialy store, there'd be nothing left of the Lower East Side," Kaufman says. "Times change, I guess. I'm 50. I'm too stubborn to move on. You gotta have roots, something to come back to, to say, 'This is something I belong to.'" 

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