

Fading Into History

By ALLEN SALKIN

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Linda Macfarlane, née Feuer, stood on East Houston Street and looked stunned as she peered south at the sleek bistros and boutiques lining Orchard Street. "It's all gone," she whispered to her husband as she clutched his arm. "What happened?"

Ms. Macfarlane, 59, left New York more than 25 years ago. Now, on a recent visit to the city, she wanted to show her husband the children's clothing store where she had worked "selling shmattes" as a teenager. But the store, whose name she cannot remember, is gone, as are most of the landmarks and talismans in the neighborhood that was for generations the traditional symbol of the American Jewish experience: the fabric merchants, the ethnic food sellers, the children's furniture stores.

"I wanted to smell it, follow my nose, the food, the places," Ms. Macfarlane said wistfully, brushing her blond hair back from her eyes. "But nothing smells the same anymore. The people, everything's gone. The whole ghetto is gone."

Last month, Ratner's Delicatessen on Delancey Street sold its last onion roll and closed after 97 years. Two years ago, the owners of Schapiro's Kosher Winery on Rivington Street rolled their barrels out of the basement and called it quits, selling the building for \$2.3 million. Two weeks ago, H&M Skullcap moved from its home on Hester Street, where it had been for half a century, to 13th Avenue in Borough Park, Brooklyn, a thriving Jewish business thoroughfare. "The Chinese don't want to buy yarmulkes," said Mendel Fefer, a salesman. Some of the remaining small synagogues have so few members that they must import teenagers from Williamsburg, Brooklyn, to help make the minyan of 10 required for daily prayers.

The long-contracting Jewish Lower East Side, the primal homeland for American immigrant Jews, has lost so much of its cultural texture and so many of its living touchstones that it may be time finally to pronounce it dead. Yet paradoxically, even as the traditional neighborhood vanishes, interest in its place in Jewish heritage is exploding, evidenced by the packs of competing walking tours, a spate of new books about its history and increased attendance at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum.

At its peak, around 1910, the square-mile area bounded by East Third Street, the Bowery, Catherine Street and the East River was home to 373,057 people, a great majority of whom were Eastern European Jews. In the 2000 census, the entire population was only 91,704, nearly half of whom were of Asian descent. Only 17,200 were whites of non-Hispanic descent.

Despite its changing ethnic and religious makeup, the Lower East Side is hardly suffering economically. Shiny new shops, selling everything from rubber miniskirts to \$10 margaritas, have taken over storefronts and brightened blocks that had been abandoned for decades. Clinton Street has become a gourmet destination and Orchard Street a high-fashion strand. The long-shuttered Sunshine Theater on East Houston Street, once a Yiddish vaudeville house, is now a cinema. Moviegoers can

fortify themselves with refreshments from the venerable Yonah Schimmel Knishes next door.

Grand Street between Allen and Chrystie Streets bustles with Chinese shops selling vegetables and seafood. Last month, Vanity Fair magazine published a map showing local outposts of trendiness.

Despite such shifts, for countless American Jews like Ms. Macfarlane, the area has remained almost a holy land in memory, an old country to return to. The real old country - the cities, towns and shtetls of Europe - has long since disappeared in clouds of war and genocide. But even as recently as a few years ago, a person walking the streets of the Lower East Side could sense the collective memory of a tangible past, helped along by the few Jewish businesses that survived.

Two years ago, the area was designated a state and national historic district. But such a designation does not freeze a neighborhood's appearance and retard change the way landmark designation does.

As a result, what is being lost now are the last images that make it possible to conjure the fantasy of the old days. And a few tenements where Jews once lived, a couple of silver candlestick sellers, Russ & Daughters smoked-fish emporium and Streit's matzo factory are not enough to do the trick for people like Ms. Macfarlane or any of the other mystified visitors seen daily on Orchard Street. To make the dream live, they seem to need the taste of kosher corned beef (Katz's Delicatessen is not kosher), the reek of pickles in brine and the Yiddish-inflected voices of haggling merchants.

They crave the specters of a vanished culture, said Joyce Mendelsohn, who teaches New York City history at the New School and leads walking tours based on her guidebook, "The Lower East Side Remembered and Revisited" (Lower East Side Press, 2001). "People got upset when Ratner's closed," she said. "They feel an emotional, nostalgic tie to the neighborhood, which is expressed in food in a large way. They are running for the bialys, for the pickles. It's like the heart of the Jewish experience they're hoping to go back to in some way."

Jewish or Not Jewish?

Some people say it is premature to announce the death of the Lower East Side as a Jewish enclave. They point to the recent restoration of a century-old mikvah (ritual bath) on East Broadway, the 270 children who attend local yeshivas and the small synagogues that still dot the streets. Kosher food is still available; Kossar's Bialys on Grand Street sells 500 dozen bialys a day, 30 percent of them to retail customers and the rest to stores like Zabar's.

William Rapfogel, executive director of the Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty, says his organization's statistics show that the number of Lower East Side Jews has not changed much over the past decade.

"It may not be as religious, but it's still Jewish," said Debra Engelmeyer, 32, whose family bought Kossar's from the company's founding family four years ago.

But the district is feeling the effects of both an aging population and real estate shifts that have transformed much of the city. Cooperative Village, for example, a 4,500-apartment complex south of the Williamsburg Bridge built as housing for union members, was for decades heavily Orthodox Jewish. Starting in 1997, when restrictions on the selling price of apartments were lifted, many residents began taking generous profits and leaving. A fourth of the units have been sold. The management of the complex says young Orthodox families are moving in, drawn by the opportunity to knock down walls and create large apartments to house large families. But real estate brokers who have handled sales at Cooperative Village say the new buyers represent many different ethnicities.

Almost every night, Rabbi Schmuell Spiegel struggles to gather a minyan at the First Roumanian-American Congregation on Rivington Street. One recent evening, just before services were to start, Rabbi Spiegel had only five men in his sanctuary. Hurrying out the door, he went to Orchard Street.

"You coming to shul?" he asked Sam Weiss, who sat outside his men's shop. "There's no one else to watch the store," Mr. Weiss replied.

The rabbi bounded into Altman's Luggage. "You're on your minyan roundup?" asked Dan Bettinger, the shopkeeper. But he couldn't make it, either.

Rabbi Spiegel tried Dolce Vita Shoes, and even stuck his head into a car parked on Rivington Street because the driver was wearing a yarmulke. Ten minutes later, he only had eight men, including a tourist from San Diego named Al Krinick who had shown up because he had heard "they were still davening" in the synagogue where his grandfather had prayed more than half a century before. A phone call to Katz Furniture on Essex Street yielded a father-and-son pair. Mission accomplished.

"Twenty years ago, you would have said there will never be a minyan there in 20 years," Rabbi Spiegel said later. "But we're still here. Ten years from now, I can't say."

Mythmaking and the Museum

While the Lower East Side may not be what it was, in fact, the neighborhood as remembered, idealized and enshrined in popular culture probably never existed.

The story of life in those precincts is achingly familiar: immigrants jammed into hellish tenements, entire families laboring long hours for meager wages in equally hellish sweatshops, rampant and devastating disease. Most Jewish immigrants wanted nothing more than to get out.

"If it were still a poor neighborhood of Jews selling cheap clothes and other things and struggling to survive, it wouldn't be iconic, it would be a problem," said Hasia R. Diner, a professor of American Jewish history at New York University and the author of "Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America" (Princeton University Press, 2000), a work exploring why the neighborhood has been remembered fondly over the years. "It's only with the moving on, with the passage of time, that that sort of stuff can be viewed as sweet and lovely."

After World War II, and gaining urgency in the 1960's and 1970's with books like Irving Howe's epic "World of Our Fathers," the Lower East Side became an ever more powerful symbol of the bygone life of the shtetl, where, as Ms. Diner put it, "families got along, neighbors took care of each other and all the food tasted better."

That impulse is turning the Jewish Lower East Side into a museum piece. Walking-tour guides point to where things used to be, not where they are. The Forward building, home until 1974 of the Yiddish-language newspaper that in the 1920's sold 250,000 copies a day, was converted into expensive loft apartments. The Forsyth Street Synagogue is a Spanish-language Seventh-day Adventist Church. The Garden Cafeteria, where Isaac Bashevis Singer set his short story "The Cabalist of East Broadway," is a Chinese restaurant.

"There is more of a future for tourism than there is for Judaism," said Philip Schoenberg, who has led Jewish Lower East Side Talk and Walk tours since 1992. "I have people who go on my tours, and all I'm saying is: 'This was once a kosher butcher shop. This was this. This was once that.' "

In addition to the tours conducted by Mr. Schoenberg and Ms. Mendelsohn of the New School, there are others led by the Tenement Museum (every weekend) and Big Onion Walking Tours (which runs a Jewish Lower East Side tour monthly). Ms. Mendelsohn, who books some of her tours through the 92nd Street Y, has been hired by the Lower East Side Conservancy to train docents for tours of historic Lower East Side synagogues. In the last year, more than 12,000 people have taken these tours.

As flesh-and-blood Jews leave, mythmaking becomes ever more powerful.

In 2000, the patch of Orchard Street in front of the Tenement Museum was torn up and replaced by perfectly even rows of unchipped black cobblestone, to give a period feel. The museum, which opened in 1988, takes visitors from around the world into tiny, historically restored apartments at 97 Orchard Street, where 7,000 people lived between 1863 and the 1930's. Annual attendance has soared, from 18,000 in 1992 to 82,000 in the fiscal year ending June 30.

Since 1986, a \$10 million restoration has been under way at the Eldridge Street Synagogue. These days, the spectacular stained-glass window on the facade is clear enough for sunlight to flow into the 115-year-old sanctuary. But this space, where 1,000 people once worshiped on the High Holy Days, still needs work. Saturday morning services are held in a small basement room.

Changes, Even in Little Shtetl

If a Jewish equivalent to Little Italy remains in Manhattan - Little Shtetl, say - it is probably the two-block stretch of Essex Street between East Broadway and Grand Street, where half a dozen stores carry signs with Hebrew lettering. Yet even here, tides of change are apparent.

At No. 7, an 11-story luxury condominium is rising over neighboring tenements. The sign promises "yards, roof terraces, fireplaces, skyline views - 1,584 to 3,650 square feet from \$825,000." At No. 11 Essex sits the building that until a year ago housed A1, a store that sold Judaica.

Past a Chinese-run store selling cellphones and car parts, at No. 13, is Motty Blumenthal's Judaica shop, named Z & A Kol Torah by his parents, Zelig and Aliza, who opened it 50 years ago. "As long as people come here, I'll stay," Mr. Blumenthal said. "It'll last at least another 5 or 10 years."

At No. 17, next door to Chinese North Dumpling, is Essex Electronics. For many of the store's 35 years, the area was a major destination for Israeli tourists seeking discounted stereo equipment. "There used to be 20 shops here," said Chaim Loeb, the manager. "Now there are three or four, but some people still come."

Above another storefront at No. 17 is a friendly ghost: the sign Ha-attikos Judaica. The shop closed years ago, neighbors say, and the space is now an apartment.

At No. 19 is Weinfeld Skull Caps, which has been at the same location for 70 years. Recent customers included Martin and Goldie Sosnick, a San Francisco couple who were ordering 240 black suede yarmulkes for their daughter's wedding. "It's nice to come to where the roots are from," Ms. Sosnick said. But, she added, "it was disappointing to come here wanting to eat in a kosher restaurant, and there wasn't one here."

Soon Weinfeld's will be gone, too; one of the owners said he planned to move the business to Brooklyn within the year, "to be in a Jewish neighborhood."

No. 21 houses T & H Insurance, which has a Chinese-lettered sign, and, until two months ago, Israel Wholesale Import, a Judaica shop, which jumped to 23 Essex, displacing a Chinese printer. Also at No. 23 is Hollywood Video, which sells Chinese-language videos; the sign identifies the address as "23 Exssex St." And so it goes.

Qun Lei, a clerk at Shun Da Sign, a store at 25 Essex Street that manufactures many of the Chinese-language signs that are installed when the Hebrew signs come down, sees the block's future more clearly than its past. "I think it's a Chinese neighborhood," said Ms. Lei, 33, who emigrated from China a year ago and calls herself "Maggie."

Ms. Lei hopes to save enough money so she and her family can leave the neighborhood, unconsciously following the path trod by Jews of nearly a century ago. "Uptown Manhattan is good," she said.

Looking at a Cloudy Future

Not every business that might speak to the real or imagined past is gone.

Streit's matzo bakery still makes unleavened bread for a national and international market at the Rivington Street address where the company was founded in 1925.

Russ & Daughters, the smoked-fish and caviar store, occupies the same white-tiled East Houston Street shop where it has been since 1914. Yonah Schimmel Knishes has survived, and Guss's Pickles has found a new lease on life near the Tenement Museum. The owners of Noah's Ark, a kosher restaurant in Teaneck, N.J., will open a branch on Grand Street by year's end.

Perhaps not surprisingly, one of the few merchants who has no intention of moving is the area's last gravestone seller. "We own the building here, and people know where we are," said Murray Silver, the 60-year-old owner of Silver Monuments on Stanton Street, a business dating from the late 30's.

Still, gravestone sellers aside, what kind of real future does the Jewish Lower East Side face? Is there enough left to make Jews feel they can find a link to a Jewish past? Or has too much vanished?

"You can find it at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, you can find it in walking tours," said Samuel Norich, general manager of the Forward Association, which publishes weekly Jewish newspapers in Yiddish, Russian and English from its home on East 33rd Street. "There are enough remnants of Jewish life on the Lower East Side and life going on now that you can build on and conjure up what used to be there. "

"In words at least."