

# Downtown at the Uptown: The Lower East Side Show

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THE IMMIGRANTS JEWS INVENTED THE LOWER EAST Side. Its cramped streets had housed generations of the poor before their coming, but only they were to give it a special meaning; the crowded neighborhood seemed to exist for them to better themselves through it.

And, out of their strivings, institutions of self-help and self-improvement were created which still serve the Lower East Side, although its Jews have long since departed. As a poor man, the Jew did not always victimize himself with his sense of his own squalor and wretchedness; the experience also yielded moments of joy and community. If a reformer such as Jacob Riis tended to regard the condition of the Jews as scandalous, this was not always the way in which the Jews saw their situation. Abe Cahan came to regard his David Levinsky's mobility as a violation of self; and the Gentile intellectual Hutchens Hapgood consciously turned to the Lower East Side for the sense of continuity and culture, in its most profound terms, which he felt lacking in the ruthless American commercial society of his day.

That being the general sense which one has of the experience, it would be almost wilful for a Jew not to be moved when he encounters visual memories of that era. To those whose experience it actually was, the encounter may be even more touching. Many have now made lives for themselves which are wholly different from what they may have once imagined they would be. That is why the Jewish Museum's current Lower East Side exhibition is attracting such large crowds these days. Coming to the exhibit out of nostalgia, the American Jew is given an image of his own origins which is neither painful nor challenging but wonderfully reassuring. This is what I was and this is what I am today, he may tell himself. Did anybody have a right to expect that much?

The Jewish Museum show takes off on the theme of the Lower East Side as "a portal to American life," but it is really a sentimental "happening" rather than a piece of social history. One enters a large room in which the stark muck-raking photographs of Jacob Riis, Byron, Tarbox, and others reverberate with the tape-recorded street noises of peddlers and hucksters which seem to be coming at you from all sides as you stare at these evocations of Jewish endurance and self-improvement. Yet, even before this confrontation,

the exhibit makes its points, as it were, unwittingly. Coming through the turnstile in the lobby one is confronted by a naked shipboard photo of immigrants on the steerage deck and one has a sense of renewal and determination, but then one moves on to see them seated, row after row in a large reception hall, at Ellis Island, awaiting processing, and they seem so much more anonymous that one is hard put to guess what jarring disappointments awaited them the moment they set foot on the "golden land."

It's like that scene in Roth's *Call It Sleep* when the father comes to the newly arrived mother and child with a bitterness that is like a seal upon his lips, but the exhibit never dwells upon such a possibility. Moments later one is faced with Zero Mostel reading animatedly from a selection of letters drawn from the *bintel brief* section of the *Jewish Daily Forward* on closed-circuit television; and the whole mood changes to a giggle. Then there are the photos of schoolrooms and sweatshops—two of the chief sources of Jewish upward mobility—and some marvellous photographs of Jewish street hawkers looking, for all the world, like declassed noblemen.

## *Nostalgic Memories*

Upstairs there is also an exhibit of old Yiddish theater posters and portraits of its matinee idols. The great voices are heard in song; Stella Adler regales one with anecdotes about some of the personalities and their mannerisms. And nearly everywhere, from nearly every wall, one is presented with images of density, perseverance and stoicism which, because of the sound effects, make one feel as if all those ghosts had stepped from their crowded cemeteries in Queens and Brooklyn to jostle one again with their cares and conditions. One stares down into a tenement courtyard so choked with washlines that it is difficult to see the patches of ground below because of the impressive abstract patterning of sheets, petticoats and undercoats. It doesn't seem like a tenement courtyard, after all, but like a tenement afloat, a tenement under sail.

Or one is confronted by the face of a Jewish Sabbath celebrant living in what appears to be a very squalid coal cellar, the eyes wide and staring as if defying poverty while before him, on a plate, a Sabbath loaf gleams with its fresh egg glaze. And meanwhile, Mostel and others intone the voices of that

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doomed way of life as recorded in the pages of the *Forward*: a young girl complains about the poverty of her boss; an immigrant expresses his guilt for not being able to join his Socialist comrades in Russia at the barricades.

After a while, it becomes difficult not to envy these vanished Jews for the meaning which their lives seemed to have, for their illusions if not for the realities; and then one remembers again how, at the first opportunity, they nearly all fled: the hungry-looking newsboys, the street arabs, the eager *cheder* children—they found nothing so positive about their poverty at the time that they were not willing to ruthlessly violate it to become the businessmen, professionals and what-have-you's of our prosperous Jewish community of today. Then the exhibit takes on a rather nagging air of the manufactured, the spurious. Was this really the way it was? One becomes annoyed that so little stress is given to Jewish radicalism, so little attention paid to the ribald. Where, one wonders, are the slumlords and the Jewish and Gentile capitalists without whom such a condition could not have been possible? Why is only passing reference made to Jewish gangsterism and not even so much as a reference to Jewish prostitution? The Chicago sociologist, W. I. Thomas, translated most of the letters in his study of how girls "turned to the streets" from the same *bintel brief* column of the *Forward* from which Mostel's televised image now entertains us with the *kvetching* charms of indigenous Jewish folk lament and folk comedy.

### *Poverty Redeemed*

And if one gets no sense of the disruptions and violations of family and culture and personal dignity which coming to the Lower East Side also meant for many a Jewish immigrant, no sense of the anger and little sense of the unruliness characteristic of lower-class life in America, one also gets a somewhat spurious account of the relevance of such experience for Jews or others today. On one of the walls there is a foreword by an official of the Educational Alliance which makes the point that the Lower East Side has taken on a similar meaning for today's Puerto Rican newcomers. But, even if this were as true as some of us would like to believe, it is doubtful that social conditions elsewhere in this country are such that it is useful to make the comparison.

Jews, as I say, were not the only ones to undergo the experience of the Lower East Side and the Jewish Museum exhibition takes note of the Italians, the Chinese, the Irish, and others. There is even one striking photo of a gang of laborers, most of whom were Negroes. It also quotes the late Sir Jacob Epstein, a distinguished graduate of the slum, about some of the violent hostilities which then existed be-

tween such groups. But it leaves us no records of the joys of Hennington Hall where, I'm told, all one needed was a tuxedo to crash a Jewish wedding any night in the week; and it neglects to mention the bordellos which were also a fixture on Second Avenue. By a characteristically Jewish process of self-censorship, it has so tidied up the neighborhood and what went on in it that a photo of two boys fighting is left unspecified and the uptown Jews are always taken at their word for their paternalistic regard for their downtown brethren. So it is that one is left wondering if this "happening" has been called to celebrate Jewish humanity on the Lower East Side or that middle-class escape to which most of the fascinated onlookers—including many Negroes—who crowd the galleries, now regard as their existence.

As I wandered through the halls of the Jewish Museum, staring at the faces of the old men at their sewing machines, the families united by exploitation and poverty, I couldn't help thinking that as bad as things were then, being poor may be even worse now. Worse, because one didn't have to have one's life scrutinized by social scientists to work in a sweatshop. Worse, too, because one wasn't made to feel like a social problem if one made one's living stropping razors or selling apples, sorting nuts, or selling newspapers. Nobody then thought the poor needed "work experience" rather than jobs. Nobody asked them to train and retrain; and the result was that they were able to endure poverty, to be resourceful at the meagrest tasks, and to live, often miserably, off the earnings of those tasks. But all that has also vanished along with the culture of the Lower East Side *shtetl*, and what we have in its place is the culture of skill, consumption and waste, of overly-stimulated expectations and unequal means; and the bureaucratization of the condition known as poverty.

One of the most touching photos in the exhibit is of a lovely young girl of no more than sixteen sewing in a tiny cramped parlor with the rest of her family. Her eyes are bright and intelligent; she has a lovely self-absorbed look, as if she were saying to herself: "If I sew enough of these things maybe I can take a walk with my girl friend on Orchard Street and I'll meet a nice student and it will be nice; my children will never have to do this. Not that it's so bad! After all, the boss is my father!"

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