



Visiting History on the

LOWER EAST SIDE

BY JENNIE KAUFMAN

IN THE 1890S, IMMIGRANTS were streaming from Ellis Island into New York City's Lower East Side. One block might house 2,000 newcomers. Pushcarts, shoppers, and children filled the streets with clamor.

Docent Barry Feldman tells the story to visitors sitting in the main sanctuary at the Museum at Eldridge Street, formerly the Eldridge Street Synagogue. The room is 70 feet from floor to vaulted ceiling, 74 feet long and 50 feet wide, with a grand balcony. Moorish arches rise over mahogany pews; stained-glass windows line the walls; Tiffany-inspired floral shades accent the glowing brass fixtures. A magnificent rose window overlooks it all.

In the tenements across Eldridge Street, eight or more people could be crammed into three small, dim rooms totaling 325 square feet.

"Imagine what it's like to come from that into this," Feldman says. "Imagine what it's like to worship here."

The synagogue was built in 1887 for an eastern European congregation; by 1910, half a million Jews lived on the Lower East Side. But the population shifted over the decades, the main sanctuary was closed, and the building deteriorated.

In 1989, the nonprofit Eldridge Street Project began restoration of the synagogue. Its completion was celebrated in December 2007.

"The Holocaust severed ties to Europe," Feldman says. For many American Jews, the Lower East Side is as far back as they go. "This is what is considered to be home. This is what they come looking for."

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Getting the Full Picture

- At the museum's Gural-Rabinowitz Family History Center, visitors can listen to oral histories, check the partial list of former congregants, or learn more through workshops on collecting family history. www.eldridgestreet.org

- At the Lower East Side Tenement Museum (97 Orchard Street), visitors can see restored period apartments of five families who lived there from the 1870s to the 1930s. Guided tours examine the worlds of Jewish garment workers and the Sicilian Baldizzi family. A "living history"

tour features a costumed actress portraying 14-year-old Victoria Confino, who answers questions about the life of new immigrants in 1916. www.tenement.org

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