

21H.221 (Fall 2006), Places of Migration in U.S. History
Prof. Christopher Capozzola
Session 15: Discussion of *Lower East Side Memories*

When we're visiting NYC and we get to the Eldridge Street Synagogue, what do you think the tour guide is going to say?

Student: He'll probably leave out how the more real-lived details and instead emphasize the grand history. Why did they make the synagogue like a typical cathedral?

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Reference the Temple Emanu-El ca. 1885 – how do the two compare? Both have Moorish design.

If you look at a lot of synagogues in this time period, a lot of them look increasingly like Christian churches, particularly those built in the US. In this moment Judaism itself is changing dramatically and modernizing and urbanizing and adopting many of the architectural and cultural forms of Christianity. In part, this is because it's no longer the case that Jews are strictly excluded from the rest of society – they can do what they want – and other cultural practices change in the 19th century very quickly, e.g. moving away from kosher eating regulations, redefining Sabbath, congregations fragmenting (orthodox, reform).

It's no accident that it's 1986 when the synagogue's restoration begins – put that in the context of this ethnic revival from last lecture. It's also connected to the rebirth of NYC and cities in general in the 80s and 90s. One of the reasons we have a tenement museum is that for 50 years, some of the buildings in the Lower East Side were empty – people were moving out, parts were decaying, it wasn't occupied. Now, with the forces of gentrification and urban life, this wouldn't have happened. That's one of the forces that actually saves it. People who are going on these walking tours are also looking back at the neighborhoods their parents/grandparents lived in before they moved to the suburbs.

Diner points out four problems with the mythic Lower East Side:

- people's attachment to this place isn't necessarily tied to the experience of the place
- Jews have been living in NY for a long time and the standard myth focuses on this turn of the century period even though present as early as 1830s – it was the German neighborhood, Jews coming from Germany
- People came not only seeking political/religious freedom, but economic push/pull factors were also at work
- No real geographical boundary or designation of "Lower East Side" – people at the time didn't use the term, it was constructed later

Questions of memory: Can people actually remember something that didn't happen to them? What's the appeal for the Lower East Side for contemporary American Jews?

Students:

- family history - "we've come a long way" explanation
- center for religious/cultural traditions – freedom to act as they pleased

It's a place distinctively Jewish and also tied to religion – but Diner questions this. When we go on the tour, will they describe the synagogue as the epicenter/anchor of the community,

but Diner suggests that it probably wasn't – other institutions were just as important. It's become thought of as a very religious place which has as much to do with secularization of 20th century life and as people moved away they looked back to this.

Student: It serves as a creation myth – it's huge, intense community

Why did this happen? One of the crucial things is that the Holocaust and WWII destroys other places that could be thought of as the "Old Country." It's also the Cold War. When the Iron Curtain goes down, they can't go back to Poland or Russia (even though they're not dying to in the first place, but it's not really an option anyway). And so the new places become "home." Diner doesn't really talk about how American Jews have that mixed relationship with Israel, particularly in the late 20th century, which is yet another option of a place to call home. But it can't be necessarily called the Old Country because it's not where most Jewish Americans are from. The Lower East Side doesn't bring the political controversy that Israel has. Israeli Jews are themselves a very diverse group of people from many countries.

Zionism emerges in 18th century Europe as a response to the sense of European Jews that know they can't really be at home in any European state and so they need a state of their own – first big leader was Austria's Theodor Herzl in late 19th century who suggested that Jewish people settle in Palestine (at that time part of Ottoman Empire, British mandate after WWI). In the course of these decades, large numbers due migrate, but not as large as numbers after 1948. After WWII, it's American Jews who are most visible, numerous, powerful on the international stage – in this sense the Lower East Side becomes the Old Country.

Where does Diner find the evidence for all of this? She uses historical artifacts, from children's books to Simpson's episodes. Now having seen *The Jazz Singer*...?

There are still tensions between parents and children, particularly in the immigrant families. If the remake of the movie was set in 1980 in a suburb, it would have been more accurate and less believable.

Collective memory

This is not a book of history – it's not trying to say what happened in the LES, it's analyzing what people remember. Yes, she draws on historical documents, but she emphasizes that people remember something else. They remember LES as a religious place, uniquely Jewish place, cultural place.

By 1980, Ribinowitz was too American a name. By changing it back to a less Anglicized spelling would be marking this person as not fully Americanized person.

All these people who want to believe something that history books time and time reiterate is not the case. We've encountered this throughout the semester – this is not how people remember it, but this is actually what happened. Why is it that people think about immigration differently from its actual history? And what is it about history that's not actually getting through?

Students debate whether historical fact/truth is better than cultural/personal memory and the validity and purposes of each.

Is this cultural process by which American Jews have remembered their history a distortion of history? A triumph of community?

What's the other option other than mythologizing this? There's forgetting your past – the generation of American Jews who moved to the suburbs in the 50s went to great lengths to do this. Furthermore, does the Holocaust have to be the central event of their culture's past which necessarily creates a cultural history of a culture as victimized? If you can remember the Lower East Side as the center of your cultural past, isn't it more positive, generative, creative than the alternative?

Repression and discrimination and violence have actually always created shared collective identities for all kinds of groups throughout history – creating an uneasiness in those communities, why do we have to be defined by something else?

The **experience of modern life** – a search for some sense of **authenticity**, solidity.

These are resistant, deliberate misreadings of history – it's not like American Jews don't understand the history books, it's that they're choosing (not necessarily consciously) to read that history in a different way.

It matters for her argument that this story is also true for non-Jewish Americans, for whom LES and Jewish are synonyms in a way. In that way, the Simpsons are a good example instead of just using solely Jewish references.