

STEVEN
KASHER
GALLERY

CREATIVE BOOM

HEARTWARMING PHOTOGRAPHS OF LIFE ON THE LOWER EAST
SIDE DURING THE DIFFICULT TIMES OF THE 1970S AND '80S

By Katy Cowan, April 27, 2018



In the 1970s and '80s, the Lower East Side was predominantly a tight-knit immigrant and working-class neighbourhood, enduring difficult times in New York City. In the spring of 1976, while walking to an art event at the Henry Street Settlement, photographer Meryl Meisler spotted a jovial elderly man wearing plaid trousers and sports jacket, zebra patterned shirt, a bow tie and yarmulke greeting people and handing out lollipops.

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He offered Meryl a lollipop and introduced himself as Mr Morris Katz, the Mayor of Grand Street. He said he lived a few doors down the block, his apartment was like a museum and invited her to see it. She immediately accepted the invitation and off they went to look at Mr Katz's treasured dolls, toys and tchotchkes, as well as enjoy a bite to eat.

A friendship was born, along with the inspiration behind Meryl's LES YES! series and exhibition, on show at NYC's Storefront Project from 3 May until 3 June 2018.

Anyway, getting back to the story... Mr Katz was a retired widower with a Yiddish accent. He used to work at Coney Island, guessing weights. This was evident in his jokes, mannerisms, and outgoing personality. For a man in his 90s, Mr Katz's schedule was very busy. He kept the apartment once shared with his wife and son, cleaning, cooking and shopping for himself.

Every day, Mr Katz would get up early and go out making the rounds to senior centres, synagogues, parks, police station and playgrounds – greeting people, handing out candy and catching up with news of his constituents. Mr Katz had a social worker, among her other clients was the real "Aunty Mame". He often took Meryl on his rounds, proudly introducing her to his neighbours. Likewise, Meryl brought her parents and friends to meet him.

As a 1978 CETA Artist grant recipient, Meryl's project was to create a portfolio of photographs documenting Jewish New York for the American Jewish Congress. Mr Katz was a natural entree to photographing the Lower East Side Jewish community.

One day, Katz called Meryl up very upset. Two youth saw Mr Katz dozing in front of his TV. They climbed through the window and mugged him. After that, it was decided bars should be put on the windows, for his own wellbeing. Though bruised, he wasn't beaten. Katz continued to live his life openly and perform his chosen neighbourhood duties.

There was a brutal heat wave in 1986, after which Meryl received a phone call from her stepmother. She shared a story about a second cousin whose father had passed away while sitting in his apartment, shortly before his 100th birthday. The name of the man was Morris Katz. Through a few degrees of separation, Meryl learned she was related to the "Mayor of Grand Street".

Years later, in 2008, The National Trust for Historic Preservation placed the Lower East Side on its list of America's Most Endangered Historic Places.

Through her series, LES YES!, Meryl asks us to be mindful that these grounds were made holy by the sweat, tears, and love of those who came before us, during a time not so long ago: "Think about what each of us is doing to learn from, preserve and contribute to history. What will we give to future generations? What will they say about us?"

You can find many of these wonderful photographs in Meryl Meisler's book, Purgatory & Paradise SASSY '70s Suburbia & The City, available to purchase online.