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PHOTOS THAT CAPTURE JEWISH LIFE IN '70S NEW YORK

By Miss Rosen, May 17, 2018



In an extraordinary, freshly uncovered photo series taken between the late 70s and 80s, Meryl Meisler celebrates the local communities of the Lower East Side.

100 years ago, New York's Lower East Side (LES) was the pre-eminent melting pot – a mixture of old and new immigrants leaving Europe en masse, creating a singular blend of Ashkenazi Jews, Germans, Italians, Greeks, Russians, Slovaks, Ukrainians, Hungarians, Poles, and Romanians. With some 400,000 Jews living in the hood, the Ashkenazi made up one of the largest groups in the LES, bringing their unique spin on old-world culture to the city that never sleeps.

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A neighbourhood with a leaning towards radical politics, the LES helped foster a new culture rooted in housing reform following the publication of Jacob A. Riis' 1890 book, *How the Other Half Lives*, which documented the horrors of people forced to live in slums. The New Law Tenements passed in 1901 resulted in the construction of settlement houses – such as the Henry Street Settlement on Grand Street – which transformed living conditions for the working class, and has continued to serve the community for generations.

In 1976, a young Jewish-American photographer named Meryl Meisler began frequenting art events at the Henry Street Settlement, where her cousin and roommate taught art. Here, she met Mr Morris Katz, the self-proclaimed Mayor of Grand Street. A retired widower who once worked at Coney Island guessing weights, Mr Katz cut a striking figure that could best be described as Yiddish chic. Donning a sports jacket over a zebra-patterned shirt, patterned bow tie and plaid pants, Mr Katz warmly greeted Meisler at the door and offered her a lollipop. She was instantly charmed.

A nonagenarian, Mr Katz stayed on the go, up early to make the rounds at the senior centres, synagogues, parks, police station, and playgrounds. Meisler began to accompany him on these trips, taking photographs and getting to know the community up close and personal.

Two years later, when Meisler was awarded a CETA Artist grant, she decided to hone in on the historic Jewish community of the LES. “Our notion of what is the Lower East Side is always changing,” Meisler explains. “I remember looking at the work of Lewis Hine and realising that by the '70s, I was seeing the next generation of a lifestyle that seemed very modern. I wanted to show a thriving Jewish community mixed in Latinx and Chinese groups.”

It was to this body of work to which the photographer returned while recently her incredible archive of New York City life. Carefully curating a selection of vintage prints as well as never-before-seen work that she is printing in the darkroom herself, Meisler has compiled an extraordinary portrait of Jewish life in the LES for *LES YES!: Meryl Meisler 1970s & 80s Lower East Side Photos*, opening May 3 at The Storefront Project, New York.

“May is Lower East Side history month and I wanted to celebrate the neighbourhood I came to know through my cousin and Mr Katz,” she says. “When I think of the Lower East Side I think of going there with my mother or my aunt to try to find an outfit for a bar mitzvah or going to Sammy’s Romanian restaurant.”

Returning to her archive 40 years after these photographs were first taken, Meisler saw her work through fresh eyes and felt a renewed sense of connection to the community: “I didn’t realise how warm [these pictures] are or how you couldn’t replicate them. Some of them are timeless and some of them are so fleeting. Now, when I look at these pictures, they look very Jewish but then, they looked like the times.”

“Many of the senior centres I photographed [Mr Katz] in are still serving people in the community. The Educational Alliance, where I taught photography to children, still services immigrants and neighbourhood people. They kept to their mission, which is a beautiful thing. That’s what makes the neighbourhood wonderful and welcoming.”