

Rose-Colored Bagels



Charles Marowitz

*LOWER EAST SIDE MEMORIES:
A JEWISH PLACE IN AMERICA*

Hasia R. Diner

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As someone born and bred in New York's Lower East Side and who lived there for twenty ineradicable years, I approached Hasia R. Diner's *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America* with a certain amount of trepidation. As it reawakened memories of stultifying squalor, bone-chilling poverty, and multi-ethnic strife, I wondered whether a subjectivity steeped in such memories could summon up the objectivity necessary to evaluate a book that attempted to put that New York ghetto into an historical perspective. Whether it has or not will be for the reader to decide, but instead of simply recusing myself (which may have been the more honorable course), I am attaching this disclaimer.

Although it appears to be a nosedive into nostalgia, Diner's book reads a lot like a polemic, and its argument is that the Lower East Side, from about the 1880s to the 1950s, became a deeply rooted, quasi-mythological matrix for Jewish consciousness and Jewish memory. "No other city in the Jewish dispersion," writes Diner, "and surely no other neighborhood, has resonated as widely in Jewish popular consciousness as New York's Lower East Side. No Jewish neighborhood in Warsaw, Lodz, Vilna, Odessa, Berlin, Budapest, or London has approached the Lower East side in terms of its mythic memorial tenacity."

This is both unassailably true and disturbingly tendentious; *true* for the hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees who began their

stateside squats in the reeking tenement-world between Fulton and Fourteenth Streets and, as quickly as they could, hightailed it uptown or into the suburbs; but *equally true* for the scores of non-Jews—Italians, Poles, Irish, and Ukrainians—who also settled there and for whom it was as much an initiation to the American melting-pot as it was for the Jews. Can one say that for the Gentile population it held the same quasi-religious "memorial tenacity" that it did for the Jews? For them, it was simply the inescapable lower depths they were obliged to inhabit until they could earn enough money to pull themselves out of them. Diner, who is the Steinberg Professor of American Jewish History at New York University, tends to view the subject of her book through rose-colored bagels.

She fastidiously and effectively creates the ambiance of Lower East Side Jewish life and sprinkles it with fascinating anecdotes and statistics. One is almost persuaded that here was a kind of reincarnated *shtetl* where East European Jews, huddled over pushcarts, haggled, kvetched, and kibitzed with one another, creating a great swarming immigrant microcosm that reaffirmed the customs and values of their former lives. But she rarely looks beneath the gregarious rumble of the community to the acrid, grasping, slum universe that festered below; a universe often peopled with *goniffs*, *shysters*, con-men, and whores desperately scraping for a living and very early learning the bitter national truth that in America the credo was more often dog-eat-dog than love-thy-neighbor.

What Diner doesn't treat at all is the way in which *shtetl*-morality, essentially communal, familial, and cooperative, was rapidly deracinated due to the prevailing capitalistic precepts of the New World, which, far from having streets paved with gold (as the immigrants believed), were strewn with a kind of

deadly quicklime that created casualties far more than they did millionaires.

Too little perhaps is made of the artistically-gifted habitués who managed to crawl out of the morass of the Lower East Side; people like Fannie Brice, George Burns, Weber and Fields, John Garfield, the Marx Brothers, Irving Berlin, Eddie Cantor, and the Gershwins—although the last three are briefly mentioned in passing. And Diner does not clearly enough acknowledge that if the denizens of these slums had one

overriding ambition in common, it was to achieve the economic propulsion to escape the squalor of their habitat as soon as they possibly could. Although there are now popular guided tours to sites such as the Eldridge Street Synagogue, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, and the checkerboard of streets around Orchard, Delancey, Ludlow, and Suffolk, I personally know of no one actually born and raised in a Lower East Side slum who has any inclination to revisit those “tourist attractions.” In fact, there is something almost ghoulish about

preserving the decrepitude of such places in the hope that they will remind well-heeled, middle-class Jews of their forefathers’ penurious origins. The kind of secret-sickly fascination that sometimes secretes itself into the souls of visitors touring the ovens of Auschwitz.

Vaguely conscious that she may be overstating her case, Diner quotes Pierre Nora to the effect that that “collective memory” is “what remains of the past in the lived reality of groups, *or what these groups make of the past*” (Diner’s italics). “Although,” writes Diner,

these stories derive their power in part from their mooring in reality, the more they are

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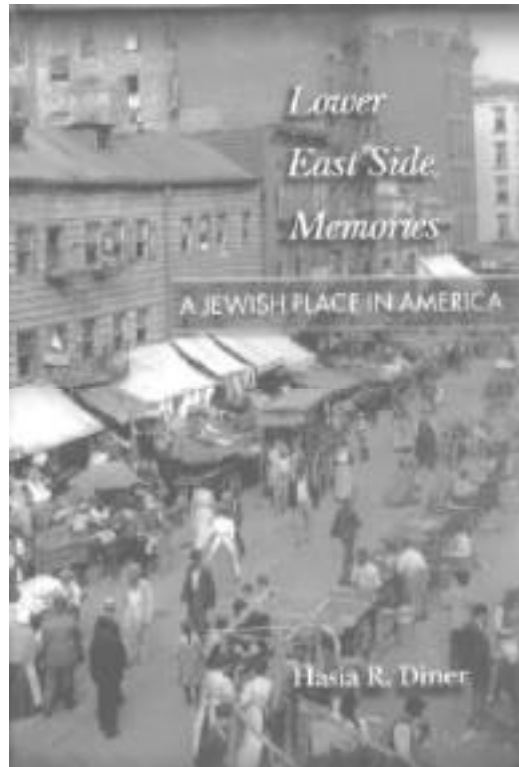
told, the more fixed they become. They metamorphose from being just pieces of information about the past into memory when, in Nora’s words, they become an element in “the lived reality of groups.”

Ordinary information about the past enters the sacred space of memory when a people need it for their present circumstance and bundle together those pieces of information into a tightly woven tapestry that constitutes their narrative.... The sacralization of the Lower East Side derived both from its actual history and from the subsequent experiences of the Jews, together propelling the transformation of the ordinary into the sacred.

This is as clear a description of the way delusions develop as anything to be found in Sigmund Freud. Past memories, originally bitter and painful, are, with the passage of time,

transformed into a kind of heroic romanticism, and, because Jews crave identity and “historical moorings,” they selectively transform elements from their past into myths and the “ordinary” becomes “sacred.” Although this transmogrification of the past into myth may help bolster a Jewish identity, it often embellishes rather than parses the truth of historical events.

When Diner is recording the history of the Lower East Side, describing the furor and fluctuations of its intellectual and cultural life, the changes wrought immediately before and after the Second World War, her book is a useful and insightful chronicle of a period and



a locale that has unquestionably penetrated the American imagination. She deftly analyses the importance of three seminal novels—i.e., Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*, and Anzia Yeziarska's *Bread Givers*—all of which helped define the Jewish American sensibility, although there are some who would argue that the works of Isaac Bashevis Singer and Budd Schulberg's *What Makes Sammy Run* ought not to be excluded. But her bludgeoning insistence on the exclusively Jewish significance of the ghetto moves from testimonial, to hyperbole, to stridency.

For myself, the Lower East Side was childhood, and *wherever* one passes that time, one acquires a “memorial tenacity,” but to assume that Little Italy, Chinatown, Harlem, or Hell's Kitchen have any less of an ethnic tug for people born and raised there is to indulge in home-town chauvinism.

Charles Marowitz's latest books are The Other Way (Applause Books) and Boulevard Comedies (Smith & Kraus). He has just completed Stage Dust: A Critic's Cultural Scrapbook of the 1990s for Scarecrow Press and Roar of the Canon, a work on Shakespearean criticism, which will be published next year by Applause.