The History of Immigration

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Body

This article is part of our latest special report on Museums, which focuses on the intersection of art and politics.

Imagine walking on the Lower East Side at the turn of the 20th century in what was then the most densely populated place on Earth -- with people from all over the world. You would hear a cacophony of languages, bump against people and inhale the urgent smells of survival.

Four museums in the neighborhood not only reimagine this immersive experience, they repurpose it as a tool to learn about immigration today. The Tenement Museum, the House on Henry Street, the Museum at Eldridge Street and the Museum of Chinese in America all fling you back to a bustling past, and, in the process, help you examine your own identity.

"What does it mean to be an American?" Gabrielle Spear, 27, a guide at the Tenement Museum asked her group of visitors in the "Under One Roof" tour, which displays the lives of three families from Germany, Puerto Rico and China who lived in 103 Orchard Street over a span of 50 years.

The answer is complicated.

Despite being a so-called "nation of immigrants," the history of the United States is one of anti-immigrant prejudice and restrictive laws. At the same time, its history is one of community support, of social welfare organizations and religious sanctuaries -- no more so robust than on the Lower East Side.

The Tenement Museum, founded in 1988, is the most established of the immigrant museums, and accessible only by guided tour of the streets and two tenement buildings. In person, and on its website, the museum embraces the rich history of American immigration -- using facts to challenge myths and rhetoric.

Michelle Moon, the museum's chief program officer, said the mission was to get visitors to rethink "some of the major negative narratives that are circulating about immigrants today."

In other words, said Ms. Spear, "We are going to talk about immigration laws and restrictions and about how they affect real people, so that they understand how real people are being affected by the laws today."

The popular "Hard Times" tour at 97 Orchard Street examines a family from the 1930s whose matriarch was undocumented, but risked accepting public benefits to feed her children, a "public charge" policy that the Trump

administration recently changed. Adolfo Baldizzi had immigrated in 1923, but after the Immigration Act of 1924 set quotas on Eastern and Southern Europeans, his wife, Rosaria, in Sicily, was unable to come legally.

She eventually made it to New York illegally, and raised two children in the three-room apartment. The family accepted "home relief" -- thanks to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt -- during the Great Depression.

The museum offers an average of eight different tours daily, and the museum is expanding its reach with school curriculums, a digital storytelling exhibit, as well as a food stall at the the Market Line (under the Essex Market). Earlier this year, the museum launched its second season of the podcast, "How to be American."

Reframing poverty as a societal issue was Lillian Wald's mission; she fought for the rights of new, and poor Americans, to be entitled to health care. A progressive reformer who founded the Henry Street Settlement in 1893, Ms. Wald is perhaps best known for starting the Visiting Nurse Service of New York.

The House on Henry Street is less a museum than a small, thoughtful exhibit on the ground floor of the Settlement headquarters at 265 Henry Street, which is still a social service, arts and health care organization.

In a compact 15 by 75-foot space that until recently held the payroll department, now there are two rectangular tables -- set diagonally to symbolize Ms. Wald's ability to bring people together. A faux window facing the street imagines a scene with a photo montage of early 20th century crowds.

The museum interpretation starts the viewer at the peak of immigration in the late 1800s and early 1900s; a short film shows how Wald was inspired when she helped a mother dying from childbirth whose doctor refused to treat her because she could not pay.

"We wanted to highlight someone who is an undersung hero," said Katie Vogel, the Settlement's public historian, who offers tours three days a week.

Ms. Wald would go on to organize women's marches -- for peace, for voting rights -- and to advocate against immigration quotas. She was a founding member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, opening the second-floor dining room of the house for the opening reception of the conference in 1909. (The room is available to see upon request.)

There are two memorable items symbolic of Wald's influence: her black leather nurse's bag and the guest book signed by heads of state and other leaders, including Rosa Parks in 1956.

In Wald's time, the Lower East Side was predominantly made up of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. Today, the Lower East Side's foreign-born population is predominantly Chinese, a result of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act that abolished national quotas, including one that had been in place despite the 1943 repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

The Museum of Chinese in America tackles the consequences of this sweeping ban and what happened after it was repealed. Its permanent exhibit moves chronologically through the warm Maya Lin-designed space that opened in 2009, showing contributions Chinese immigrants made to the United States.

"We want people to appreciate that Chinatowns were a key chapter in telling the overall Chinese-American narrative," said Edward Cheng, the museum's spokesman. "They were set up as safety zones, they were the only places that ethnic Chinese could safely live and find work."

The museum has recreated a general store, with original cabinetry, and a full glass window facing quiet Lafayette Street. The general stores were focal points for the Chinese community: part pharmacy, part post office, part bank, full-time social hub.

The museum's exhibit is just 1 percent of its collection, and when a five-alarm fire on Jan. 23 destroyed the upper floors of 70 Mulberry, where the archives were housed, officials feared the worst.

Since then, Nancy Yao Maasbach, the museum's president, said one-third of the 85,000-item collection, housed on the second floor, had been rescued from the building. Rescue and restorations will be ongoing, she said.

So far, items saved include cassette tapes, 35-millimeter film reels, photos of New York's Chinatown in the 1980s, Chinese opera costume accessories, store signs and fragile folded paper sculptures -- which volunteers in white Tyvek suits and gloves were seen carrying by hand through Chinatown to the museum on Centre Street.

About a 10-minute walk away, tucked into a nondescript block of tenements stands a grand building of a different era: the Eldridge Street Synagogue. Built in 1887 and shuttered when its congregants dwindled in the 1940s, it underwent a 20-year, $20-million restoration completed in 2007. In 2014, a museum opened in the basement of the synagogue, with a modest permanent exhibit detailing its history.

But the soaring sanctuary is the gem. Built by two German Catholic brothers for an Orthodox Jewish congregation from Eastern Europe, it is an ode to architectural, if not religious harmony, incorporating Moorish, Victorian, Gothic styles.

What electrifies this solemn space is the modern rose window, illuminated by the East sun and installed in 2010. Designed by the artist Kiki Smith and the architect Deborah Gans in vibrant blue and yellow hues, the fragmented stained-glass design evokes the universe, reflecting the sky and star pattern throughout the sanctuary. The window melded these five-pointed "American" stars along with the six-pointed Star of David, to symbolize the harmony of the old world and the new.

Jewish survival through five centuries is on display on both sides of the pews, in an exhibit of 89 Hanukkah menorahs from five continents and some 500 years.

Today, the synagogue is rarely used by the diminished congregation and is separate from the museum that operates the space. But its stewards still take precautions. On a recent day, officials from the Department of Homeland Security were in the synagogue conducting a routine safety check, amid a nationwide uptick in anti-Semitic violence.

It was a reminder that the past is ever-present.

Graphic

PHOTOS: Clockwise from top, the Tenement Museum's "Hard Times" tour

a January fire to the building housing the archives of the Museum of Chinese in America jeopardized 85,000 items

Eldridge Street Synagogue's stained-glass rose window

the House on Henry Street exhibit's faux window displays. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY TODD MIDLER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

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