

THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE ON NYC'S LOWER EAST SIDE

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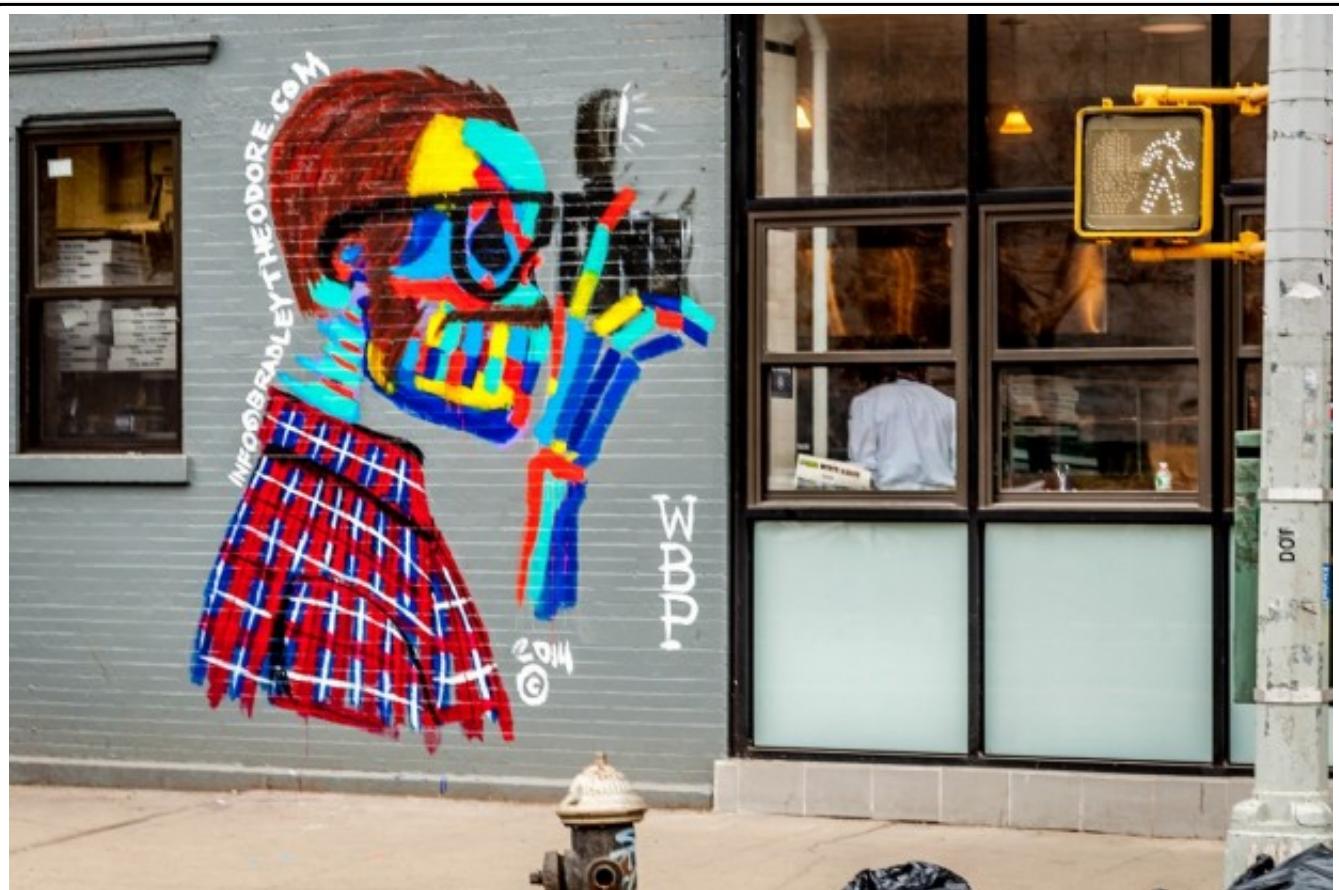
by [Lance Longwell](#) on April 13, 2014

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Tenements were the backbone of the immigrant experience in New York. By 1900, over 2 million people lived in these buildings of squalor. Most of the apartments had no light, no ventilation, no fire escapes and were completely unsanitary (drinking water from a well less than 10 feet from outhouses). The world was shocked by the publication of Jacob Riis' "How The Other Half Lives" in 1890 which detailed these horrid conditions. Yet, despite the squalor, a beautiful culture flourished in the slums of the Lower East Side.

We lived in Manhattan from 1999-2004, but have since moved away. When we lived here, this area south of Houston and east of Broadway was a bit of a mystery to us, so when we had the opportunity to take a Lower East Side walking tour, we jumped at the chance. Our guide is from [Walks of New York](#), which specializes in many different New York walking tours.



Street art on New York's Lower East Side

If the United States is the great melting pot, the Lower East Side is the broth – everyone's first dip in the great soup. Originally an aristocratic neighborhood (home to Lord and Taylor and Brooks Brothers), successive waves of immigration brought millions of newcomers to the slums. First came the Irish, followed by Germans, then Italians, then Eastern European Jews, and finally wave after wave of Chinese immigrants arrived in this area (although we could argue that that a new group is moving in – the Hipsters). With each new wave, the neighborhood evolved. Our tour helped us see the experiences of these latter immigrant groups.

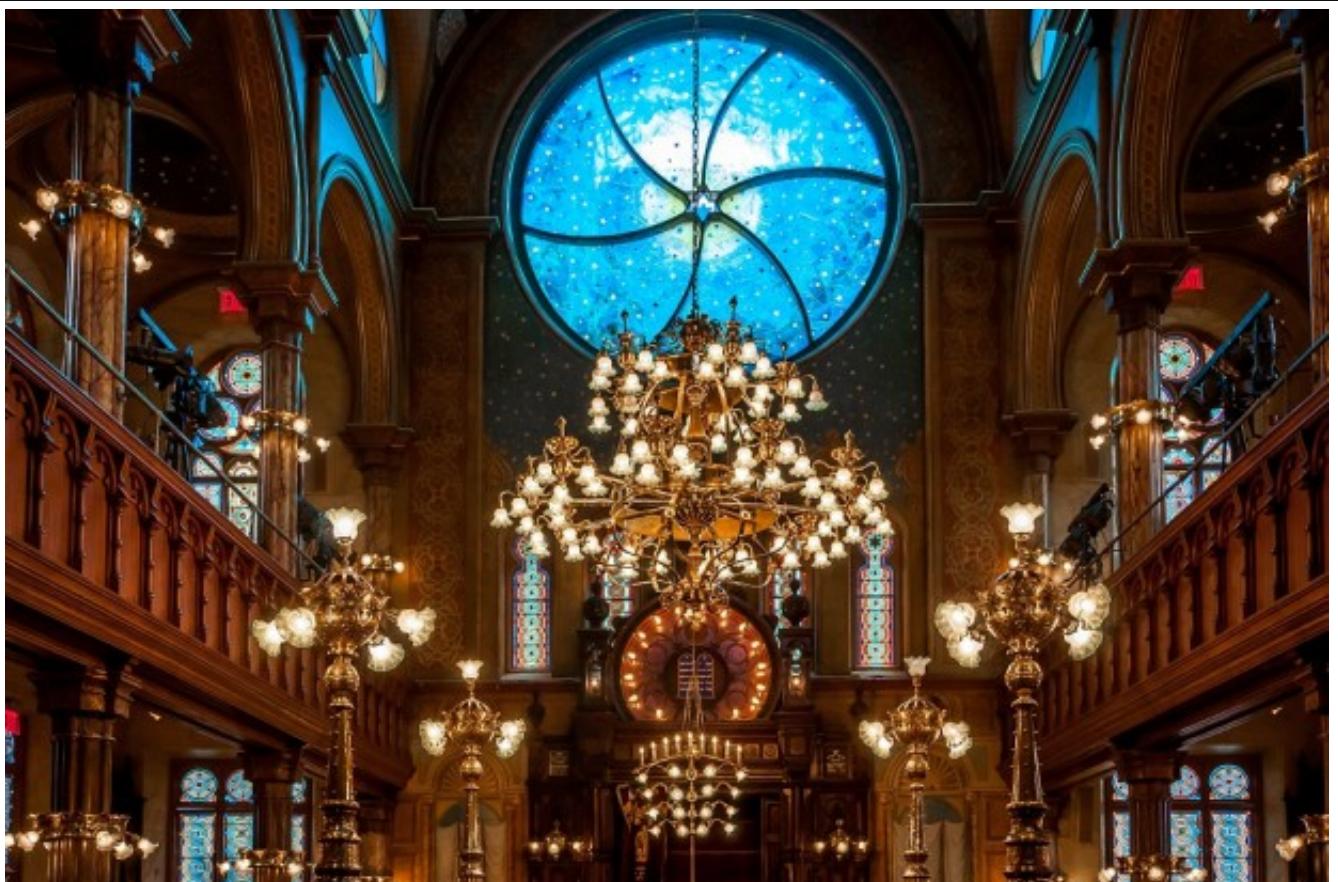


One of the many garment businesses on the Lower East Side

We started our Lower East Side walking tour at the Forward Building, home to New York's English-language Jewish newspaper, learning about the early political and social transformations of the residents of the neighborhood. As we walked past buildings, our Walks of New York tour guide, Jeff Dobbins, explained how early immigrant benevolent associations served important functions in the community and have evolved over time – from Jewish to Chinese. And he pointed out how the tenement buildings changed and conditions improved for the residents of the neighborhood.



The centerpiece of the tour is a visit to the [Eldridge Street Synagogue](#) and the Museum at Eldridge Street. This was the first synagogue built in the U.S. by Eastern European Jews. Built in 1886 with Moorish details for \$91,000, the synagogue has been a centerpiece of Jewish life ever since. Our docent, Sylvia Weiner, told us beautiful stories about the Jewish experience in New York. The Eldridge Street Synagogue was renovated in 2007, when electricity was finally added to the building! For us, the highlight was the beautiful stained glass designed by artist Kiki Smith (we've been huge fans of her work for years).



Eldridge Street Synagogue with Kiki Smith Stained Glass

After walking the streets for several hours, we'd built up a hunger and Walks of New York ensured the tour had many edible delights. We headed to [Kossar's Bialys](#). We'd never had a *bialystoker kuchen* (or bialy) before, despite having lived in New York for years (how we missed this, I'll never know). A bialy is basically a bagel without the hole in the center. Instead, it is indented and filled with onions or garlic. Bialys are also baked (vs. bagels which are first boiled in water before they are baked in an oven). Kossar's is the oldest maker of bialys in the United States and these delightful rolls come piping hot out of a 500 degree oven. They're best consumed hot and are absolutely delicious!



A craftsman making bialys

The tour then headed over to Essex Street for some playfully abusive treatment by [The Pickle Guys](#). These guys dish barbs and jokes, along with their vast array of pickled vegetables. The Pickle Guys' barrels of vinegar-based goodness are representative of the large numbers of pickle carts that used to clog this street over a hundred years ago.



All types of vegetables are pickled

The tour concluded with the story of a local boy who made good: Yonah Shimmel. Yonah was a Romanian Jewish immigrant who used to sell knishes from a pushcart on the Lower East Side. He was very successful and soon opened a storefront on Houston Street in 1890. Ever since, Yonah's family has been hawking these delicious knishes from the [Yonah Shimmel's Knish Bakery](#) (or as it's known to locals: The Knishery). We had an egg cream and sampled the various knishes. We loved the potato, but were lukewarm on the cabbage.

Returning to New York City is always a sort of homecoming for us. We love to wander the streets, see how the city has changed and what it has to offer. The Lower East Side walking tour with Walks of New York is that experience on a grander scale – seeing how the streets of New York have changed over the last 140 years. This was both a fun and educational way to spend a day in the Big Apple.





You had me at 'Bialy'

Walks of New York hosted us on this tour. All opinions of the beautiful, unusual, and delicious on this amazing tour are our own.