

## **The Eldridge Street Synagogue, a Site of American Jewish Memory**

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Located at Eldridge Street 12, in Lower Manhattan, the Eldridge Street Synagogue (ESS) stands boldly amidst the brouhaha of what is today Chinatown as cars entering the Brooklyn Bridge whith by. This vast building is unique for several reasons. Its Moorish facade dominates the neighbouring tenements, and the building's majesty is all the more powerful considering the nearly total disappearance of the quarter's former Jewish identity. The synagogue is an imposing reminder of the past, easily forgotten in the rapid succession of immigrant communities to the neighbourhood over the past century: formerly Jewish and Italian, now primarily Chinese and Caribbean. The *schul* has been open to visitors since the end of the 1980's. The congregation now counts only 30, even though the synagogue itself attracts great interest, and is frequently mentioned in tourist guides.

The principal sanctuary has not been used for services since the 1950's, the congregants meeting in a chapel (classroom) below ground better suited to the small community. Loyal members of the congregation have since ensured that not once has a Shabbat not been celebrated at the *schul* since its founding. Though the synagogue no longer serves as large a community as it once did, it nevertheless every year welcomes 20,000 visitors anxious to follow in the footsteps of previous generations of Jewish immigrants.

Visitors to the synagogue have the privilege of hearing from their guide the story of its construction and subsequent abandonment, which explains the deterioration from which it suffered until very recently. The circumstances of the synagogue's rediscovery by an art historian named Gerard Wolfe in 1975 are now the stuff of legend. One day, on a self-guided tour of Lower East Side synagogues, Mr. Wolfe forced open the door of the Eldridge Street Synagogue, and found to his amazement prayer books lying in the pews, and pigeons flying

in the humid sanctuary. The leaky roof had allowed the rain to damage the murals, including several paintings of the Holy City Jerusalem. Mr. Wolfe then organized the first initiatives to restore the synagogue, founding the Association of the Friends of the Eldridge Street Synagogue, which by grassroots fundraising began the initial renovations, and obtained the classification of the site as a Historical Monument by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission on December 11, 1979. In 1996, it was named a National Public Landmark.

The Eldridge Street Project, a non-profit association which in 1982 replaced the Friends, currently works diligently to complete the restoration and publicize the synagogue. Its ambition is to render the site one of the most important symbols in the collective memory of Jewish immigration to America. Since its renovation, the ESS has had thus two functions: no longer solely a House of Worship, it also offers educational opportunities for children, guided visits, conferences and exhibitions. The offerings range from Jewish cooking classes to lectures by university professors. The Eldridge Street Project portrays the synagogue as a microcosm of the larger history of Jewish immigration to the United States. Thus, after decades of neglect, the synagogue is once again, although this time in a more secular manner, a place for the community to meet and exchange ideas. Etymologically, the Hebrew word for synagogue, Beit Knesset, means the “House of Assembly.” The religious Jewish community sees itself as a group of people assembled for prayer (a minimum of ten men). The space itself is of secondary importance to the number gathered.

The Eldridge Street Synagogue, whose official name is Kahal Adath Jeshurun with Anshe Lubz, was the first synagogue built in the Lower East Side by Ashkenazi Orthodox Jews from Eastern Europe. Built between 1886 and 1887, it symbolizes the expansion of the neighbourhood in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Its facade in brick combines Moorish, Gothic and Roman elements, as was characteristic of its architects, Francis and Peter Herter, who built many tenement buildings in the Lower East Side.

The Kahal Adath Jeshurun congregation (“the Community of the People Israel”) is the result of the union of two previous Ashkenazi communities: Beth Hamedrash (“The House of Study”) and Holche Josher Wizaner (“Those Who Live in Virtue”).<sup>1</sup> Founded in 1852, Beth Hamedrash rapidly became the largest Orthodox Jewish Community in America. By uniting with Holche Josher Wizaner, it became even more influential. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the

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<sup>1</sup> From a report by Susan Upton Lawrence, *Landmarks Preservation Commission*, July 8<sup>th</sup> 1990.

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ESS was one of the most frequented synagogues in the Lower East Side. More than a thousand people attended weekly Shabbat services: “On High Holidays, mounted Police officers maintained order in the surrounding streets. Around 1920, the members of the congregation began moving Uptown, while new immigration laws limited the number of new residents in the Lower East Side. In the 1940’s, the synagogue was only open for High Holidays and special occasions.” The sanctuary thus was progressively deserted until its abandonment in 1950.

Though the Eldridge Street Synagogue is proclaimed by its members and admirers to be the oldest house of worship for Eastern European Jews in New York, in reality it is “merely” the oldest structure in the city built specifically to serve as a synagogue. Other synagogues in the Lower East Side, were in fact established in pre-existing buildings that had previously served other purposes, such houses or even former churches. For example, the Ahawath Chesed congregation, founded in 1846, acquired in 1855 a house on Columbia Street and converted it into a synagogue. In 1872, the congregation moved once again to Lexington Avenue and 55<sup>th</sup> Street.<sup>2</sup> An other example: the current building of the oldest Orthodox Russian synagogue (Norfolk Street 60) was originally a Methodist church which was bought and remodeled in 1885.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the ESS can only be considered the oldest synagogue based on the criteria of having maintained its function as a house of worship for the longest uninterrupted period, not by the date of its construction. Could this geographic stability be the reason that the synagogue is named for the street it dominates, and not its actual community?

Within the specific community of Eastern European (primarily Russian) immigrants, the ESS can also be considered the “oldest” synagogue, since German Jews, preceded by Sephardic immigrants, had come to the United States well before those from the East. The Sephardic congregation Shearith Israel, indeed, was the only one present in North America between 1654 and 1820. In the 1840’s, Jewish immigrants from Germany founded Temple Emmanu-El, at Grand and Clinton Street, though it was later moved to the corner of 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 65<sup>th</sup> Street.

These competing claims of anteriority between immigrant communities are not at all uncommon, as each community wishes to perceive its own arrival as

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<sup>2</sup> “Lower East Side Churches and Synagogues” by George Freedman in *East Side News*, June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1958.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

much earlier than others fresh off the boat. Older immigrants made up the Jewish aristocracy, economically integrated in American society, whose values, language and lifestyle they adopted. Each wave of immigration resulted in the redefining of the Jewish community as a whole; the community has always been an evolving entity, remolded by each new addition.

The preservation of the sites which make up the community's memory is especially urgent considering that New York is the world's largest Jewish city. These sites help paint a larger picture of New York at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

As Pierre Nora writes in *Realms of Memory*,<sup>4</sup> public concern for preservation rises as the fear of sites' vanishing becomes more acute. The threat of total disappearance spontaneously engenders preservation efforts and/or reconstruction. Despite the relative lack of documentation, we know that, unlike other synagogues in New York City, Eldridge Street probably owes its survival to the loyalty of its congregation, which never sold or left it, and never allowed it to serve any other purpose than that for which it was built. The survival of the Eldridge Street Synagogue is especially remarkable considering that the New York preservation movement is relatively recent and the Landmarks Preservation Commission was only founded in 1965.

New York's urban density and skyscrapers are proof that for any site to persist amidst such a Darwinist battle for building space, it must necessarily have an important function. Sites of considerable memorial value leap out at us at every turn, without our even knowing how, but the surprise of discovering them makes one stop in his tracks and reflect. Such is the case with the Eldridge Street Synagogue, or with the three tiny Spanish-Portuguese cemeteries of the Shearit Israel Sephardic congregation, of which the oldest, located in Chatam Square, dates from the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. No longer used for burials, they have become monuments of a bygone era, and remind passers by that a Jewish life (and death) took place in the Lower East Side. These monuments are the embodiment of the monument of the "passage into history", in the sense that they allow us to realize, without a brutal rupture, the first generation's transition into the past. What was for them a house of worship is now for their children and grandchildren a place of commemoration.

These sites owe their conservation to the fact that the property on which they are located has never changed hands, and thus never provoked battles over the

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<sup>4</sup> *Realms of Memory. The construction of the French Past*. Volume 1: conflicts and divisions. Edited by Pierre Nora and Larry D. Kritzman, Columbia University Press, New York, 1998.

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past or ownership. It is perhaps more than a pure coincidence that it was in Jerusalem (thanks to the CRFJ) that in April 2004 I chose to study these questions of originality, anteriority and memory.

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Galith Touati graduated in History from the University Paris 7, with a thesis entitled “Work of Memory: New York and the Jewish immigration”, in June 2002. She spend a month in Jerusalem, in April 2004, for further research, thank to the hospitality of the CRFJ and its former director Dominique Bourel. She is now in charge of the communication of an association whose goal is to encourage the teaching of the history of the Holocaust in French schools. (gtouati@hotmail.com)