

Wandering Jew - A Nosh of the Big Apple by Alina Tugend

It seemed the perfect thing to do on a recent winter Sunday in New York — visit some synagogues and nosh on ethnic foods. So my husband and two sons got in the car, drove through an amazingly empty Manhattan to the Lower East Side and joined the second annual Lower East Side Jewish Conservancy Noshing Tour Extravaganza. Once home to 500 houses of prayer around the turn of the 19th century, now only about 20 remain active on the Lower East Side. The area has gone through numerous incarnations since after World War II, when many Jewish families moved up and out to other parts of the city or to the suburbs. At one point the neighborhood was considered so dangerous, people were afraid to walk the streets at night, but now it is experiencing something of a renaissance among Jews and non-Jews alike. We had no idea if we would be the only ones to brave the cold and damp but were pleasantly surprised; about 30 people made up our tour. The first stop was Congregation Chasam Sopher, which was built in 1853 and is the oldest continuously operating synagogue in the Lower East Side. The synagogue underwent a \$3 million renovation and now is a stunning jewel boasting beautiful stained glass illuminating the 12 tribes, chandeliers and polished pews. “This building was done from the ground to roof,” Eugene Weiser, president of the congregation, told us. The previous temple president, by the way, was his father, Morris Weiser, a Holocaust survivor. The snacks, cookies and other sweets were a welcome treat, especially for our sons, Ben and Gabriel, ages 10 and 7. Our next synagogue was Congregation B’nai Jacob Anshei Brezezan, also known as the Stanton Street Shul, where we gathered in the basement for herring, garbanzo beans and potato nik heated on the radiators, just as it is every morning for the men who gather for a minyan. (This nosh was appreciated more by my husband and me than our sons.) Founded in 1894 by immigrant Jews from the town of Brezany in Poland, the synagogue is tall and narrow, a classic example of tenement-style synagogue architecture.

Elissa Sampson, Lower East Side native, synagogue historian and enthusiastic speaker, stood on a table and told us about the stages her shul has undergone in trying to survive over the years. She showed the synagogue’s constitution, which stipulated how much each member could expect in burial money as well as the amounts of aid tendered to the disabled, widowed or orphaned. She brought alive the sense that each of the synagogues that used to densely populate the area were tight-knit congregations that mirrored not just the recent immigrants’ home country, but their hometowns. B’nai Jacob also is “one of the last functioning synagogues in the area that has old-timers and new arrivals,” she said. One of their youngest congregants, a 3-year-old, entered the synagogue, then grabbed a cane, so he could be like the old men he sees at prayer.

After our snack, we went upstairs to the shul. Divided by a curtain between men and women, it’s in shabby condition, with peeling frescoes, decades-old round fluorescent lights and a few boarded-up windows. The good news is, the buckets once needed to catch the rain are gone, because the roof has been fixed.

The windows still need to be repaired,” Sampson said. “It’s a race against time.” The tour continued, but we almost gave up at that point. It was rainy, we seemed to be walking forever and, despite the delicious food, our spirits were flagging. But we continued, and were glad we did. The final synagogue was Kehila Kedosha Janina, the last remaining Greek-language, Romaniote-tradition synagogue in the western hemisphere — and it is still operating in its original form. We had never heard of Romaniote Jews, an obscure branch of Judaism, a tiny minority within a minority. They are Jews who, after the destruction of the Second Temple, were sent on a slave ship to Rome. Instead, a storm forced them to land in Greece, where over the next 2,000 years they developed uniquely different ethnic and religious customs. Marcia Haddad Ikonopoulou, president of the Association of Friends of Greek Jewry and the synagogue’s museum director, showed us the beautiful Torah scrolls wrapped around such heavy tubes that during Simcha Torah, she said, they put out a call for some of the younger, stronger men to help carry them. The synagogue has no paid membership, but a mailing list of 3,000 households nationwide, and its leaders organize annual visits to Greece to help revitalize its Jewish community. “We are the remnants of the Romaniote Jews,” Ikonopoulou said. A Holocaust memorial sits in the corner of the shul, easy to overlook but breathtaking in its simplicity. It is a Mogen David, with shards of glass representing

Kristallnacht. Six memorial candles burn, for the 6 million killed. And on the ground are stones taken from Corfu that Greek Jews walked on when they were rounded up on June 9, 1944, never to return. The building is undergoing the first stages of interior restoration, which will replace the antiquated electrical system and add air conditioning, along with re-doing plastering and painting while staying as close as possible to the look of the original interior.

Our tour ended with stuffed grape leaves, sugary sweets and, of course, olives. We then stepped out into the streets of the Lower East Side, which now — to our newly educated eyes — seemed to have a patina of the 19th century overlaid on modern Manhattan.