

“Stores of Memory:”
An Oral History of Multigenerational Jewish Family Businesses in the Lower East Side

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*I have walked through many lives, some of them my own, and I am not who I was, though
some principle of being abides, from which I struggle not to stray.*
-Stanley Kunitz, 1979

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“L’Dor V’dor” is an Aramaic phrase that means “from generation to generation.”¹ These words on my lips have been repeated by many Jewish relatives before me, for thousands of years. Nestled in prayer, we speak together. I remember how my father spoke them, how my grandmother spoke them, L’Dor V’Dor, means from generation to generation.

L’Dor V’dor”—Dor, that word, also means place, habitation. From place to place we carry our memories. Imagine how your ancestors lived, breathed, moved, worked. Are there some things that you still do, some habits that you still carry out, some stories that you tell? What has stayed with you from place to place? What stories do you carry with you from generation to generation?

[Music: *Family Portrait* blends into *Mlle Modiste*]

This is Liza Zapol, and today we will glimpse into the stores of memory of the Lower East Side. We shall speak to Jewish store owners who have inherited businesses from their parents and grandparents. We will hear what it is like to do what they do, what their family has done for generations, in the same place.²

Alan Adler: **Work in the store**³

Walter Hernandez: **to the store**⁴

Bill Levy: **the business**⁵

Jerry Cohen: **the store**⁶

Lorraine Levy: **the family in the store**

Aaron Gross: **the business**⁷

Alan Adler: **The story of the family business**

¹ “L’dor v’dor” is a part of a Jewish prayer called the Amidah. The full phrase it comes from translates to “The Lord shall reign forever, Your God, O Zion, from generation to generation, Hallelujah.” The phrase directly implies carrying on the religious traditions of Judaism and a commitment to monotheism. However in Jewish public culture, the phrase can mean the repetition of stories, of “Jewish” memory.

² My use and approach to oral history is largely influenced by Ron Grele and Luisa Passerini. In “Listen to Their Voices,” Ron Grele examines the narratives of two Jewish factory workers, in order to “analyze and grasp the underlying structure of consciousness which governs and informs oral history interviews.” From Ronald Grele, *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History*, 2nd ed, (Chicago: Precedent Publishing, 1985), 213. Like Luisa Passerini, I am interested in the ways that oral histories “tell us, directly and indirectly, about the everyday side of culture.” From Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 1. Passerini goes on to discuss the methodology of paying “particular attention... not only to the content of their memories but also to the form in which these memories take, that is to say, to the cultural and symbolic import of their stories.” (Ibid., 4)

³ Alan Adler, interviewed on January 12, 2011, New York, NY.

⁴ Walter Hernandez, interviewed on January 8, 2011, New York, NY.

⁵ Bill and Lorraine Levy, interviewed on November 21, 2010 in New York, NY, and February 10, 2011 in New Jersey.

⁶ Jerry Cohen, interviewed on January 5, 2011, New York, NY.

⁷ Aaron Gross, interviewed on February 7, 2011, New York, NY.

Mitchell Cohen: **it's our family business.**⁸

The Lower East Side is at the Southeastern point of Manhattan, a bulbous landform that faces Brooklyn. The neighborhood has been home to many immigrant groups moving to New York, starting with the Dutch in the 1600s, to the most recent immigrants, the Fujianese Chinese in the 1980s.⁹ From locals buying groceries to tourists getting souvenirs, shopping has been an important part of the neighborhood for much of its' history. Walking the streets today, it is possible to find all kinds of shops that cater to both a local and visiting population. Chinese-owned shops offering fruits and fish on Grand Street, bodegas on most street corners offering everyday goods, and fancy wine bars and coffee shops on Rivington and Stanton streets.

And, there are also the Jewish owned family businesses. I like to go to the Lower East side for pickles and bialies, a special bagel with no hole.¹⁰ I spoke to some shoppers and shopkeepers about their favorite goods from The Lower East Side.

JC:¹¹ **I used to eat these little Chunkies.**

⁸ Mitchell Cohen interviewed on March 13, 2011, New York, NY.

⁹ Personal communication with Emily Gallagher, tour guide at the "Stepping Out," a walking tour led by the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. She informed me about Fujianese history and influence in the Lower East Side. Walking tour, March 11, 2011.

¹⁰ A bialy is a like a bagel, but it has no hole. Instead there is "an indented center well that is ringed by a softer higher rim, all generously flecked with toasted onions and... a showering of poppy seeds." From Mimi Sheraton, *The Bialy Eaters* (New York: Broadway Books, 2000), 2.

¹¹ Please note the following about the markers regarding the multiple uses of orality in this annotated thesis

- The entire script is voiced in the audio thesis, except for the footnotes.
- As noted in a conversation with Luisa Passerini, there are many alternating voices in this audio piece. That of historians, interviewees, and my recorded and narrating voice. I also quote newspapers, historical accounts, and literature. My voice is heard in at least three manners: as a narrator, introducing and contextualizing characters; as a more overtly historical subject in reflexive moments; and as an interviewer. The sounds of the street and environment of the Lower East Side is another character in the piece, though it doesn't explicitly reflect voiced orality, it takes aural space. Personal communication, Luisa Passerini, April 20, 2011.
- The first time a voice is heard in a section, the full name is written here. Subsequently, the initials will be listed.
- When my name appears here (Liza Zapol, or LZ) it is because I am speaking directly to the person interviewed.
- The bold faced writing refers to interview text, or "actualities." An actuality is a term borrowed from radio journalism and it is "an excerpt from interviews, news conferences, speeches, etc.—in other words, the recorded sound of someone speaking." From Jonathan Kern, *Sound Reporting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 335.
- These actualities are edited for thematic content and sense, but I have endeavored to preserve the meaning and context with which these statements were made. "----" indicates an internal edit, and disparate interviews or interview sections are here presented in sequence.
- The text that is not in bold is my narration, which has been added subsequent to the interviews.

MC: Let's see, I mean, I loved chocolate covered pretzels, Chocolate covered graham crackers.

Marlene Lamm Spigner: And of course the chocolate. Oh! Of course the chocolate. Because my mom would make egg creams!¹²

Hasia Diner: They had pomegranate doughnuts, I mean it's (*smacks her lips*)...¹³

AA: Both sets of grandparents always had the dried fruit in the platter, with the Saran Wrap over it, so that when the grandchildren came, or when company came, they could always open it up.

Food quickly comes to mind as a nostalgic connection to the Lower East Side, but there are also many other kinds of Jewish owned stores. To better understand the context for these stores, I spoke to Suzanne Wasserman:

Suzanne Wasserman: I'm Suzanne Wasserman. I'm the director of the Gotham Center for New York City History. I'm a[n] historian who has written about the Lower East Side for many years.¹⁴

Liza Zapol: How did the Jewish Lower East Side begin?

SW: Well the Jewish Lower East Side began pretty early with German Jews, coming to what was then Kleine Deutschland.

SW: And it wasn't just German Jews, it was more a German community. And they started coming in the 1840s, many of them were escaping after the failed revolutions of 1848.

Jews always were pushed and pulled to the New World. Pushed out by anti-Semitism and by pogroms, and also pulled for the same reasons that other immigrants have been pulled to the new world for economic, political, and other opportunities.

So the first Jews to come were the German Jews, who came in the 1840s and 50s, and then increasingly after the May laws were passed by the Czar which increased violence against the Jews, in what is today Poland and

-
- The words I transcribed here are the spoken, not the written word. I have added some punctuation for sense, but otherwise, the words on the page are verbatim from the audio piece.
 - Words in brackets and plain text refer to sound design in the audio piece.
 - Words in brackets and bold text are grammatical corrections to the actualities.
 - Words in parentheses and italics refer to voiced sound by interviewees.

¹² Marlene Lamm Spigner interviewed on October 22, 2010, New York, NY.

¹³ Hasia Diner interviewed on February 18, 2011, New York, NY.

¹⁴ Suzanne Wasserman interviewed on March 4, 2011, New York, NY. She is the Director of the Gotham Center for New York History and an award winning filmmaker and historian.

Russia, and other Eastern European countries, Jews started coming in huge numbers to the Lower East Side, starting in the 1880s.¹⁵

SW: And most people did not speak English. So they went directly from Castle Clinton, which was the point of demarcation before Ellis Island, or Ellis Island to the Lower East Side, and immediately started looking for work.

Many immigrants at this time began earning a living by pushcart peddling. A pushcart was literally a little box on wheels, which people picked up at a stable, and rented for a quarter a day.¹⁶ Pushcarts were a first step to earning a living in America.¹⁷

SW: At a pushcart you could see a husband or a wife or a grandmother or even a grandfather and also children helping out as well.

This is what historians call a family economy.¹⁸ Customers also shopped in actual stores, located on the ground level of the crowded apartment buildings where many of their customers lived.

SW: The stores were just really a step up, one or half a step up on the ladder of success from a pushcart. A lot of times a pushcart vendor would be, you know, would save a little money and then they would go indoors, set up a store, but the stores were, a lot of the stores had no window displays and in fact the windows just looked awful, and indoors they would have no set

¹⁵ In his encyclopedic history of Jews in America (with inordinate focus on the Lower East Side), Irving Howe begins with the date 1881, when Alexander II was assassinated by revolutionaries. This led to waves of pogroms in the Pale of Settlement, which caused mass immigration to America. From Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanich, 1976), 1.

¹⁶David Favalaro, "Questions for Curatorial- Pushcart Peddling." The Lower East Side Tenement Museum Blog, <http://tenement-museum.blogspot.com/2009/06/questions-for-curatorial-pushcart.html>.

¹⁷ The noted reformer and writer of the early 20th century Jacob Riis observed about the Lower East Side, "There is scarcely anything else that can be hawked from a wagon that is not to be found, and at ridiculously low prices. Bandannas and tin cups at two cents, peaches at a cent a quart, "damaged" eggs for a song...The crowds that jostle each other at the wagons and about the sidewalk shops, where a gutter plank does the duty for a counter! Pushing, struggling, babbling, and shouting in foreign tongues a veritable Babel of confusion." From Jacob Riis, *Where the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1957, quoted in "Orchard Street Shopping: From Pushcarts to Discount Clothing to Fashion Boutiques" on the Tenement Museum Website, http://www.tenement.org/encyclopedia/lower_orchard.htm.

¹⁸ Annie Polland writes, "Scholars have shown the absolute importance of the family unit in analyzing the immigrant economy at the turn of the century. This emphasis holds especially true for Jews: more than any other contemporary immigrant group, Jews brought women and children with them and also often relied on the wages of their teenage children." She then goes on to expand into the idea of the family religious economy. From Annie Polland, "Working for the Sabbath," *Labor: Studies in Working Class History of the Americas*, 6, no. 1, (Spring 2009): 35.

prices, so you would have to haggle indoors. Increasingly that changed, but it took a long time...

There are many iconic black and white images of the Lower East Side taken in the 1910s and 1920s.¹⁹ The realities of squalor, disease, and poverty are hidden in the nostalgic images. The streets are filled with pushcarts and people, horse drawn carriages, and busy stores.

[Music: *Eastside Gluckstern's Restaurant Commercial*]

Suzanne Wasserman states that the Lower East Side residents began to move to Brooklyn and the Bronx with the opening of the subway and the building of the Williamsburg Bridge at the turn of the century. The neighborhood's population growth abruptly stopped in the mid 1920s with the Immigration Restriction Acts.²⁰ These acts set severe quotas and numerical limits targeted towards immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe. So, by the end of World War II the area became more highly populated by other groups- Chinese, Puerto Ricans, African Americans moving from the South, Dominicans, and others. Despite all this change Jewish Americans continued to live, work and return to shop in the Lower East Side. Suzanne Wasserman recalls coming to the Lower East Side to shop in the 1980s.

SW: When I moved to New York... I moved to New York in the early 1980s and I was very, very was compelled by this still very Jewish quality of the East Village and the Lower East Side. I was fascinated by it. Because even though it was a heavily Spanish-speaking neighborhood, there was also a very, very Jewish feel to it. There were a lot of Jewish, these Jewish businesses left. There were a lot of the bra, you know, the bra and lingerie stores that were still Jewish run businesses, and I was really fascinated by that. I was interested in the sort of vestiges of the Jewish Lower East Side, and it was still very, very much in evidence um, through, through the 1980s. You know, there's a handful of places today. But of course there's always people that feel sad about any change that happens. And you know, I'm one of those people as well. But it's interesting to see the changes that have

¹⁹ The Lower East Side of 1890-1920 is often cited as one of the most densely populated places on Earth between 1890 and 1920. The most specific text states; "in 1881, there were twenty-two thousand tenements holding half a million people; in 1895, there were forty thousand tenements housing 1.3 million people." In Lawrence Epstein, *At the Edge of a Dream* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 45.

²⁰ The Emergency Quota Act of 1921 was the first law to set numerical limits and severely restrictive quotas on immigration, and it had the effect of cutting the number of new immigrants to America by over half. These quotas were based on the 1910 census. The Immigration Restriction act of 1924 set the annual quota of any nationality at 2% of the population of people of this nationality resident in the United States in 1890. Since many Eastern European Jews arrived in the United States post-1890, this was deliberately excluding people of such populations. From Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, "Emergency Quota Act," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emergency_Quota_Act, and "Immigration Act of 1924," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immigration_Act_of_1924.

happened on the Lower East Side. It's always been a neighborhood that-where many, many changes have happened but it's also been a neighborhood of continuity. It's been both.

While the Lower East Side is a changing space inhabited by people of many ethnicities and backgrounds, the place of the Lower East Side has a particular hold on the imaginations of American Jews. Suzanne Wasserman says:

SW: I was fascinated by it.

Many histories of American Jewry begin at the Lower East Side, even my own family stories begin here.²¹ Apparently the neighborhood has achieved a:

Hasia Diner: Plymouth Rock Status in, shall we say, American Jewish history. That is, it's the place from which the narrative is told...

That's Professor Hasia Diner at NYU. She is a scholar of Jewish American History and has written a book called Lower East Side Memories.

HD: Actually if I can tell you a story...

She has a story about buying a special Hannukah jelly doughnut

HD: You know the doughnuts, the sufghaniot

in the Lower East Side and bringing them to a friend's holiday party:

HD: There's this doughnut factory on Grand...I mean these are obviously totally—I mean they have pomegranate doughnut, I mean...

HD: And when I brought it to my friend's house in New Jersey, and I said I got these in the Lower East Side, people oohed and aahed. Ok? And now they happened to also have been very good, but it was kind of like value added.

She suggests these doughnuts are highly valued because the Lower East Side became like a "New Old Country" for European American Jews.

HD: For American Jews, the Old Country really ceased to exist as a real place after World War II. And it was not just that there was a thoroughly American born generation that came to dominate the community, but rather the simultaneous destruction of Jewish life in Europe, and the fact that most

²¹ In my family genealogy chart, there is a post-it stating "It all begins here!" with an arrow pointing to the names of my ancestors who emigrated from Russia to the Lower East Side.

of the places from which the parents or grandparents of American Jewry had come were, as they said in the 1950s and 60s, behind the iron curtain. So the Lower East Side began to become a stand-in for authenticity, which is what the old world represented.

So as soon as Jewish people started moving away to other boroughs and eventually to the suburbs, they returned to the Lower East Side to consume Jewish culture. Sightseeing, shopping, and eating became a way of reconnecting with their past.

HD: You know I may be a[n] historian, cynical, dispassionate and all that, but I have to say I get a little bit of a kind of ripple in me when I see those places, and even though I have no family history to that neighborhood, my parents never lived there. It doesn't speak to my family story, but I certainly buy into it also.

She says that for many Jewish people, returning to, and remembering the Lower East Side is a way to connect with an imagined community of Jewish unity. American Jews connect to the place, space, and memory of the Lower East side in a way that it becomes a collective memory of all American Jewish experience.²² And one way we connect to this past, is by “buying into it,” by eating and buying goods from the Lower East Side.²³

[Music: *Alone in Kyoto*]

Next, we're going to hear about shopping in the Lower East Side from Walter Hernandez, a superintendent at the Eldridge Street Synagogue, and a story about my trip here when I was twelve. Listen to the way the space is depicted, to the ways in which we differently characterize the shopkeepers. In both stories, there is someone called a puller, who stands out on the street and tries to attract customers by pulling them in by the elbow.

²² There has been extensive literature about collective memory, a term that was coined by Maurice Halbwachs. Collective memory refers to constructed, shared, and communicated group memories. From Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, edited by Lewis A. Coser, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson discusses the historical and ideological formulations of national identities as imagined communities. From Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. ed., (London: Verso, 2006). I blend Halbwach's conception of a shared identity through memory, with the idea of an imagined community of a collective Jewish identity and past.

²³ Suzanne Wasserman traces the history of nostalgic shopping in the Lower East Side in “Recreating Recreations on the Lower East Side: Restaurants, Cabarets, Cafes, and Coffeehouses in the 1930s,” In *Remembering the Lower East Side*, edited by Hasia Diner, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 155-175.

I met Walter at the Eldridge Street Synagogue, which is sandwiched between Chinese owned grocers and cell phone stores. This beautiful synagogue was once at the center of the Jewish Lower East Side.

Walter Hernandez: I was born and raised on the Lower East Side. I was born on Eldridge Street, a couple of blocks away from here.

Walter inherited this job of caretaking this synagogue from his father. His family is from Puerto Rico, Sephardic Jews from Spain. He grew up here in the 1950s and 60s, with many other Puerto Ricans, African Americans, Chinese, and some remaining Jews from Europe. He reminisces about the Lower East Side of his childhood, particularly one shop and shopkeeper.

WH: She was a Jewish lady, and she used to say “Hey, what are you looking for?” and then she’d say “here, come here, come here!” and then she’d go and grab you, she used to grab you by the arm and she used to bring you into the store. And then her husband used to be [inside] the store, and she used to “Look, look!” and she’d show you the t-shirts and everything. I used to love it, brand new t-shirts, they used to come like, three in a pack. I used to go every weekend, out there, get different stuff.... Converse sneakers. The sneakers back then, they were about six dollars, six, seven dollars. Late Sixties... ‘68, ‘69, the prices were great.

Walter says that he doesn’t really shop for clothes in the neighborhood anymore. They are too expensive.

[Music: *Pepita*]

I also remember shopping in the Lower East Side as a child, my one trip to the neighborhood when I was twelve years old. My mom said it would be fun to go here as part of our Big Apple excursion. “It’s where the Jewish men sell all the bargain clothing!” she encouraged. I liked to shop. But only at the Gap. It was December and frosty, and we set out to walk from Midtown.

We crossed East Houston onto Orchard Street with sore feet and lower expectations. These were not the malls of my suburban childhood. It was 1990. Old tenement buildings were boarded up, the streets were dirty, some shops had rusted gates covering the windows. Men from another era pulled us, too, by our elbows into stores cluttered with bags and leather and winter woolens.²⁴ When we walked away they turned to each other and spoke in an unfamiliar language. “Yiddish!” whispered my mother.

²⁴ Both of these stories link memories of shopping in the Lower East Side with descriptions of Jewish shopkeepers who are extremely different from the speakers. The shopkeepers are depicted as being from another era, while the speakers are seen as modern. Walter is nostalgic about prices and a place to which he won’t be able to return. My story shows that I did not want to participate in a nostalgic Jewish economy, but felt more comfortable in (de-ethnicized) suburban malls.

“I’m cold.” I said. “I want to sit down. You *shlepped* me down here for this?”²⁵

[Music: Yidel Mitn Fiedel]

Recently I learned that like so many Jewish Americans, my ancestors had a store on the Lower East Side. My mother unearthed some photographs of her grandfather and great grandfather. Images of men advertising their photography studios in the heart of the Lower East Side.²⁶ I discovered my great-great-grandfather, Kalman Paley, emigrated from Russia in 1881, and within a few years was running a photography business on East Broadway, Delancey Street, and Rivington Street. Four of his eight children, the boys, joined the business, which became the “Paley Brothers Studios.”

In the images, Kalman looks unsmiling, aristocratic. Speaking with my mother about these images, she says she doesn’t see much family resemblance.

Liza Zapol: **You think he looks uptight?**

Nikki Zapol: **I think he looks uptight. He looks pretty uptight! He looks like a man who had eight children and maybe he doesn’t remember their names.**

Liza Zapol: **You! Come over to the studio and work for me!**

Nikki Zapol: **Right, right.**²⁷

Not long after discovering the addresses on the images we went to the Lower East Side together, my mother and I. There are fewer signs of the Jewish owned businesses I visited as a child. But amongst the new stores and tenants are traces of the neighborhood’s history.

[Music: *Grand Machine No.12*]

We stopped in front of 104 Rivington Street, where my great grandfather Nicholas Paley ran his photography studio. The building is probably the same- a white brick tenement building with a store a couple of stairs down from street level. The store is now a trendy

²⁵ My impressions of the Lower East Side as an alien place, and the simultaneous estrangement from my own Jewish identity in this story is reflected on more generally by historian Jonathan Boyarin. He writes of the ways in which Lower East Side is seen by other Jews as a byproduct of assimilation into an American capitalist model. “The romantic conception of the restless loner masks the centrality of population transfers in the peculiar dynamic of American capitalism. Mourning for lost common places is suppressed by the constantly reinforced shame of origins, which is complimented, not overcome, by sentimental nostalgia.” From Jonathan Boyarin, *Storm from Paradise: the Politics of Jewish Memory*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 3.

²⁶ Roland Barthes writes about the photograph as an “umbilical cord” which “links the body of the photographed thing” to the viewer. Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 80-81. Marianne Hirsh refers to this connection as contributing to “its status as relic, or trace, or fetish.” From Hirsch, “Family Pictures,” (*Discourse* 15, no. 2, 1992-3): 6. Throughout this paper, space functions similarly to photographs- as a link to the past, and as a relic, trace, or fetish.

²⁷ Nikki Zapol, interviewed on February 4 & 5, 2011, Cambridge, MA.

women's clothing store. Standing in front of the store made our ancestor's existence more tangible, more real than we had ever felt before.²⁸

But for Jewish people who are working in the Lower East Side, as their ancestors did, how do they conceive of the past, and how does it inform their identities today? I spent time with three businesses in the Lower East Side. Each business has a different conception of the past and relationships to the neighborhood. On Rivington Street is Streit's Matzo, a kosher Matzo making factory that is running at capacity. On Forsyth Street is Harris Levy Linens, which is over a century old, and is struggling with neighborhood change. Back on Rivington Street, there's the neighborhood favorite Economy Candy. The same families have been operating these Jewish owned-businesses for generations.

[Music: *Dayenu*]

²⁸ Michel de Certeau refers to the personal, emotional, embodied stories located in place which is similar to the ways my personal history is linked to the store at 104 Rivington. "There is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can "invoke" or not. Haunted places are the only ones people can live in.... Places are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reserve, remaining in an enigmatic state, symbolizations encysted in the pain or pleasure of the body." Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 108. This is an attempt to make some of these internal, embodied stories of the place of the Lower East Side audible.

So now, let's visit Streit's Matzo. This family business has thrived in the Lower East Side for five generations. Despite these connections to the past, the family members in charge wonder if it makes sense to stay here.

Liza Zapol: **I'm in the Lower East Side, walking down the street towards Streit's Matzo factory.**

[Ambient sound—Rivington Street]

On Rivington, I pass Sugar Sweet Sunshine, which is a cupcake shop run by former actors. That same storefront is where my friend's relatives ran Shapiro's wines. There's a faded sign for Shapiro's on the side of the building. In this city so many stores come and go, just like people come and go. What's left are memories and traces, like the Shapiro's sign.

[Music: *Unknown Title*]

Streit's covers half a block. The public face is a lonely store in the corner, where one man sits behind the register and there are shelves and shelves of matzos. Fifty years ago customers would crowd into this store to get their matzo. But now Streit's Matzo sells mostly by distribution to Supermarkets. The boxes have the motto "the Taste of a Memory," there is a prominent stamp that says "made with pride on the Lower East Side."

The factory fills four gutted tenement buildings. I'm headed to the management offices to speak to Streit's family members.

[Music: *Sweethearts on Parade*]

I see a man in his 50s, wearing a denim shirt, and smoking a cigar.

Alan Adler: **Alan Adler**

He's a 4th generation Streit in charge of operations at the factory. He says "smoking cigars at the factory is a family tradition, but all the other guys are dead now." He snuffs out the cigar and leaves it on a hook outside the office. We go inside the management offices.

[Ambient sound—opening the door]

There's a rabbi at the desk taking calls, otherwise it's a fairly ordinary office—cubicles and file cabinets. I see a framed picture of one of Alan's relatives on the wall. He has a cigar in hand and he's inside the factory next to hundreds of boxes of matzo. "I don't smoke inside the factory," Alan says. And he leads me to the back office.

AA: We've been here since 1925, and before that there was a hand bakery over on Pitt Street

Matzo is unleavened bread, a crucial part of the Passover table- to symbolize the flat cracker eaten by Jews when they escaped slavery in Egypt and didn't have time for the bread to rise. It's also just a good cracker. I like eating it with avocado and salt. I asked Alan about how they got into the Matzo making business.

LZ: What is the founding story of Streit's Matzo?

AA: Well I wasn't here then so it's just a story. My grandfather- great grandfather, Aron Streit, had Matzo baking experience in Austria. He had come to America. My great grandfather was in a matzo bakery, a hand bakery here with Rabbi Weinberger, over on Pitt Street. My grandfather was in the Neon Sign business. And as my Aunt likes to tell it, when my grandmother became pregnant, he needed a more steady source of income. So that's when my grandfather and great-grandfather opened up the modern machine bakery here on Rivington Street. Um, and I guess in some ways that really is the story of the family business. So in addition to doing a mitzvah and proving Jews with the Matzo they need for Passover, it's also the way to put bread on the table.²⁹

The Streit family was one of the first families to mechanize Matzo baking. Before that, Matzo was handmade by groups of women.³⁰ The factory floor was and is worked by men. Behind this family story is the larger context of the mechanization of daily processes, and the growth of factories in the late 1800s and early 1900s, especially in New York. It also tells of the business savvy of the Streit family. With the massive immigration of Jews to New York City, there was a large demand for matzo, especially for Passover.

AA: It's the old story of people were here, you know, pressed into little apartments like sardines and everybody wanted to get out. It has this romantic flair to it, but living conditions apparently weren't quite that nice in the 1910s and 1920s.³¹

²⁹ Mitzvah means commandment. It also means Jewish, religious law, and has also come to mean "a good deed." Alan could be referring to any of these meanings. Matzo is unleavened bread, and is more often referred to as a cracker. Because bread as we know it is not allowed during the 8 days after Passover, inherent in this statement is the notion of assimilation.

³⁰ Some religious Jews object to the mechanization of the matzo process, and only use hand matzo for religious purposes. For more information, see Jonathan Sarna, "How Matzo Became Square: The Manishevitz Story," National Jewish Retreat, Torah Cafe.
<http://www.torahcafe.com/musicvideo.php?vid=157b4ab2d>

³¹ Moses Rischin discusses "the settlement of Eastern European Jews in New York, where they became the victims of the metropolis as well as its builders." Alan's reference to the terrible living conditions in the Lower East Side is a part of the larger patterns of modernity. Rischin also discusses the

The families moved away from the Lower East Side when they could afford to. Alan Adler grew up on Long Island and always wanted to be in the Matzo business.

AA: You know the family members who lived around here would come and you know, work in the store, take orders, pack orders, add up the orders. And I really didn't like that that much. So I would try to work in the factory whenever I could. You know my favorite job was a Matzo picker. Taking the Matzo out of the oven and breaking it into the box sized portions and putting it on the rack. Same job is being done today, same spot where I was working as a kid.

In the back office, I meet Alan's younger cousin, who remembers visiting the factory as a child.

[Music: *King Porter Stomp*]

Aaron Gross: Hi my name is Aaron Gross, 5th generation Streit's Matzo Company. I run the business with my two cousins, who are both 4th generation, and I really concentrate on Sales and Marketing. Um, but you can really see it when you bring someone by here for the first time, their eyes light up and it's really like you're stepping back into time when you walk into this place. So as a child it was still new and such a great experience. Um, and you may lose it over time just being here every day, but it takes me back when I see people that see the place for the first time.

The factory makes my eyes light up too. There is a zigzagging assembly line of Matzo that winds through punched out walls and ceilings. It reminds me of the imaginary inventions of cartoonist Rube Goldberg, who made ordinary tasks extremely complicated. The factory was designed to fit the tenement buildings about 70 years ago and hasn't changed much.³² Alan takes me in an elevator up to the Second floor.

[Ambient Sound- elevator]

subsequent secularization of Judaism, and "the development of a new group consciousness on the part of Eastern European Jews under the pressures of the modern city." Thus Alan's insistence on the secular and the religious in terms of the family story refers to larger cultural patterns at the time, towards Capitalist work-models. From Moses Rischin, *The Promised City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), xiii.

³² Rube Goldberg (1883-1970) was a cartoonist best known for his elaborate drawings of imaginary inventions. These were often "an elaborate set of arms, wheels, gears, handles, cups and rods, put in motion by balls, canary cages, pails, boots, bathtubs, paddles and live animals – takes a simple task and makes it extraordinarily complicated. He had solutions for How To Get The Cotton Out Of An Aspirin Bottle, imagined a Self-Operating Napkin, and created a Simple Alarm Clock." From "Biography," Rube Goldberg. <http://www.rubegoldberg.com/?page=bio>.

I meet Yury Rachmann, from Uzbekistan. He's mixing flour and water in the part of the factory where only Jews can work, before the matzo is baked. Yury used to work construction, and he says his current job is similar to mixing cement.³³

[Ambient Sound- assembly line]

He pushes it down through a chute, where it gets flattened and sent through the oven at 900 degrees Fahrenheit. Then it gets cracked by the matzo picker, Alan's favorite spot, and put on a hanging rack. Then it's sent back up on a pulley chain, to the second floor. There, it gets cooled and wrapped and boxed. All of this happens in 18 minutes. That's part of the rules so that it's Kosher for Passover. And everything is watched over by a Rabbi on every floor.

Alan works in the back office. Alan's father wasn't allowed to work in the back office because he wasn't born a Streit, he was only related by marriage.³⁴ Alan insisted it would be different for him because he was a direct descendent, not an in-law. But his family didn't listen.

AA: My father, my grandfather didn't want me coming into the family business. That's why I picked law and was a lawyer at the State Capitol for 20 some odd years.

And they made it pretty clear that there was no spot for me here and I'd better find something else to do with my life. Of course all I ever wanted to do with my life was be like my father, go to NYU business school and come into the business, but there was a twenty-year hiatus between school and getting back into the business.

Aaron Gross grew up in North Carolina, and worked in another family business when he got out of college.

AG: I was training racehorses for a couple of years prior to [working] here. My father trained racehorses for many many years. Actually, my grandfather or great grandfather was in the horse business, my great uncle was in the horse business. So it's always been Matzo and horses. Right now it's all Matzo.

But once he moved to New York he started to work in the family factory.

³³ The observation of the similarity of the work of Matzo making to building construction is interesting as they are both highly mechanized and male work spaces.

³⁴ While it would be hard to draw conclusions from this small sample, it seems that this was largely the case in all interviews conducted for the project: direct male descendents were favored to run the business, and in-laws, while offered jobs at the businesses, were not directly in line to inherit the businesses.

AG: When I started I was working another job but I was working nights here. Just doing things around the factory. I worked all – basically every position in the plant just to learn the plant and just to see how things were done. And I just enjoyed it. I enjoyed working with my family. We all get along very well.

Aaron and Alan talk about what could be seen as an inherited job by describing the ways in which they worked their way into the job. They describe working other jobs, and working various jobs in the factory itself. But this is an inherited job, similar to the work of the men that came before them. I ask them how they are connected to prior generations:

AA: Basically, it's just everything we do here, we have pictures of Irving and Jack signing checks at this very desk, and my cousin and I do the same thing now, you know, fifty years later. Just walking the halls, seeing how the matzo's coming out of the machine,

AG: And also to be just walking in the same halls, walking in the same - that my great grandfather, great great grandfather walked around in, um, I knew, my great grandfather passed away when I was like seven, seven years old, so I knew him, but, you know, I was a seven year old kid, so I didn't really know him that well, so it's neat just to, you know, be in the same, be doing the same things he was doing. And it just a testament of what we've done to keep this thing going, and we're actually growing now as well, so it's even better.

Being part of a lineage- in a long Matzo chain, is also what keeps Aaron invested in the company.

AG: It's something that I do picture myself doing, you know, 'till the day I retire, and I would love to build it you know, to get it to the 6th and 7th generation. The company should grow according to the size of the family as well. That's the plan. So I don't plan on jumping around to another place, because, I think a lot of it has to do with a vested interest. Just to be a part of something. Maybe that's what keeps me going.³⁵

³⁵ It is important to note here that traditional modern conceptions of lifespan and mortality are somehow superceded by the survival of the business. The interrelationship of conceptions of the self, of the family group, and of the business challenges death, because of the longer time span of these businesses. This theme is carried through in all three businesses. Aaron's historical memory spans five generations, which, as Luisa Passerini states, "If generations are counted according to the sociological span of twenty five years each, we come up with at least one hundred and twenty five years for the depth of this memory." (Personal communication, April 24, 2011) Oral histories are normally conceived of covering eighty to one hundred years, especially in industrialized, Western cities. Jan Assman writes: "Through the practice of oral history, we have gained a more precise insight into the peculiar qualities of this everyday form of

The “something” that Aaron is referring to is more than the business, it's a sense of belonging to a larger social group. Perhaps this is connected to the Jewish social space of the Lower East Side, or a connection to the Streit family name, which is not actually Aaron or Alan's last name. But it's clear that being here is a way that Alan and Aaron think they can connect to the past. Their memory of their ancestors is literally performed in repeating the same actions as prior generations.³⁶ It's in the everyday behavior that they remember, whether consciously or not. But what if they don't remain in these buildings, what will happen to the connection to their past?

AA: So I realized, you know, pretty soon after I came here that this place was getting old. My cousin Mel and I were pushing for a plan to move the factory. The family members on the board commissioned us to hire in a design engineer and we had plans for a new factory. We finally put the building on the market, and we basically had an offer, that, you know, at top dollar. And then family members were like, well I don't know if we should move, this is where grandpa worked. So we didn't sell the building, and we have decided to stay. It would just be easier to operate out of a modern factory with modern equipment. But then the downside to moving would be I wouldn't need as many men, at least on a day shift. I could probably do a day and a night shift just to try to keep everyone employed. So the fact that I'm still stuck here operating on six stories and four tenement buildings is not all bad.

LZ: What is your feeling about how much of the factory has to do with the Lower East Side?

AA: Emotionally, as a family member, I think a lot. As a businessman, very little. People wouldn't care if it was made in New Jersey or if it was made in the Lower East Side. It adds something to the family story but I don't think people are generally buying a story, you know. If we put burnt product in a

collective memory, which, with L. Niethammer, we will call communicative memory. Its' most important characteristic is its limited temporal horizon. As all oral history studies suggest, this horizon does not extend more than eighty to (at the very most) one hundred years into the past, which equals three or four generations.” From Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” (*New German Critique* 65, 1995), 127

In response, Ron Grele says “I found that an odd comment because oral history, while it fits the definition of communicative memory, preserves that memory for all time and, of course, throughout history people have communicated their memories to each other and for centuries we have had records of those communicat[ive] memories.” (Personal communication, April 24, 2011)

³⁶ Paul Connerton writes of how social memory can be transmitted by habitual, performative, bodily practices. From Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 4. Alan and Aaron's self conception also links to a larger Jewish collective identity. Connerton refers to the “socially specific spatial framework of memory” (*Ibid.*, 37). Since the Lower East Side as a place refers to a mental conception of a Jewish social space, and making Matzo is also tied to Jewish religious behavior, Alan and Aaron's conception of themselves are linked to the social space of American Jews.

box they wouldn't care about our story, they buy the product because it tastes better than the competition.

Hasia Diner would disagree. Remember how she said the doughnuts tasted sweeter because they were bought on the Lower East Side? She said the doughnuts were value added, because of the memories and the sacredness of the Lower East Side. Alan may be a pragmatist, but he thinks that the matzo might taste differently if it were made away from the island of Manhattan.

AA: One of the things is, people always say the pizzas and bagels taste better in Manhattan. It's the water, I don't know. You know. One of the concerns is could we duplicate our product elsewhere. Now the engineers say oh it's easy to duplicate Manhattan water, reverse osmosis, it's not a big deal so they tell me. One thing we have is we have two ovens here, two sheeters that form the matzo, one on the first floor, one on the third floor. And the product looks and tastes slightly different. So with the exact same equipment, the exact same water and the exact same flour I can't make the exact same product on two different floors in the same building, it is a question of what will the product look and taste like.

Faced with the obstacle of moving, the men at Streit's Matzo are dealing directly with the questions of memory, place, and the commodification of nostalgia. Asking about place and memory leads Alan to ask what Matzo is...

AA: On one hand we sell a commodity, it's a food source, which is why it does well in bad economies because people still have to eat. On the other hand it's a religious item that Jews use eight days for Passover every year. And then there's also the memory and the intangibles of "I remember the pink box."

[Sound: remixed language]

**I remember the pink box."
pressed into little apartments like sardines
"I remember the pink box."
I don't think people are generally buying a story, you know.
"I remember the pink box."
it's also the way to put bread on the table.**

[Music: *Yiddishe Meydale*]

[Music: *Dub Latina*]

About three blocks South and seven blocks West from Streit's Matzo factory is the Harris Levy store. The blocks surrounding the store on Grand Street are filled with Chinese American markets, and as I pass the smells of fish and lychee pervade my sense of smell. On most days the streets are crowded with people of all ages, the din of sellers hawking their wares.³⁷

I turn up Forsyth Street for my next interview. Outside there is a black flag that says "Harris Levy, established 1894." The building was once The Odd Fellows' Hall, a society for drinking, dancing and gambling. Now, the ornate store is accompanied by the music of recorded soft jazz and filled with fine linens. The owners are Bob and Meryl Levy, but I met with Bob's parents Bill and Lorraine. They are now in their 80s and ran the store for 51 years with other relatives.

Bill Levy: Many is the time I say it was an accomplishment that Lorraine and I stayed together for so long because we were 24-7 like, attached at the hip!

Bill's grandmother started the business in 1894 by renting a pushcart after emigrating from Eastern Europe. This was not so unusual, to have a woman running a pushcart. The *New York Post* of 1898 states "there are many women in the pushcart business... many who get them by proxy, it being a law, unwritten but unacknowledged, that women should not undertake pushcart trundling."³⁸ Once she earned enough money, she opened a store on Hester Street and named it after her husband. He was a religious man and didn't help much in the store.³⁹ Sitting in the Harris Levy store, Bill remembers coming into Manhattan from the Bronx as a child and visiting the building where his grandparents lived and worked.

³⁷ In 1925, Jewish American writer Anzia Yeziarska wrote of the music of the Hester Street market in *The Breadgivers*: "The pushcart peddlers yelling their goods, the noisy playing of children in the gutter, the women pushing and shoving each other with their market baskets—that that was only hollering noise before melted over me like a new beautiful song." The main character Sara had just earned 25 cents peddling herring. From Anzia Yeziarska, *The Breadgivers*, Edited by Alice Kessler Harris. (New York: Persea Books, 1975), 22.

³⁸ Olive Gunby, "The Pushcart Peddlers, The Swarms in and about Hester Street- Enormous Growth of the Trade- The Proposed Market Place- Views of a Veteran- What Some Men Have Earned- The Police and the Vendors," *New York Evening Post*, August 20, 1898, quoted in Suzanne Wasserman, "The Good Old Days of Poverty, (PhD diss., New York University, 1991), 184.

³⁹ It was common in Jewish settlements in Russia that Jewish men would devote their time to prayer and their wives would financially support their families. This is depicted as a conflict in Yeziarska's *The Breadgivers*, where old world patriarchal religious values cause friction with new world capitalist, egalitarian values. Sara's father is depicted as a selfish man who devotes his time to his "books" and therefore relies on his daughters and wife to support him. Historian Annie Polland further discusses the themes of the family religious economy in "Working for the Sabbath," *Labor: Studies in Working Class History of the Americas*, 6, no. 1, (Spring 2009): 33-56.

BL: I would walk up an old set of creaky wooden stairs and there was this small apartment where I presume that they - looking back I presume they lived there and there was a huge coal burning stove, I was always impressed by that stove because it was so imposing looking, so in addition, as I say to all her duties in trying to run the business and taking care of eight kids and doing all the laundry by hand and doing all the cooking and baking, I often wonder how she ever survived that.

Bill's father and uncles took over the store from their parents. They did so well that the store moved again to Grand Street.

BL: At one time, Grand Street was the main area for, uh, linens, we used to call it in those days dry goods, and in the vernacular, shmattes.

In order to get better and fancier goods than the other stores, Bill's father started traveling to Europe in the 1920's to get imports, sometimes visiting family in the old country on the way.

BL: I can remember my father working six and a half days a week because they would close early on Friday in observance of the Sabbath, and he would uh, be off on Saturday but he'd have to go back into the store on Saturday night, so on Sunday we were open so he spent a good deal of his time in the store and so I didn't really get to even see him all that much.

Being open on Sundays made the shop a destination for Jewish families returning to the Lower East Side, since Sundays were not a day of rest in the Jewish religion. However, the religious Blue Laws required that stores be closed on Sundays to protect Christian store-owners from having to work on their day of rest.⁴⁰

BL: We'd normally get tickets for opening on Sunday, we were breaking the Sabbath Blue Laws but my father would go- fight it in court by mentioning that we did close on our Sabbath, a Saturday, and technically it was breaking the law to open on Sunday, but in most cases the judge would overlook the fact that we opened.

Bill imagines his father as powerful and principled, willing to sacrifice much for his business but not his religious beliefs.

⁴⁰ Polland writes, "In 1913, the Kehillah, the Jewish community of New York, reported that 60 percent of the Jewish Lower East Side stores remained open on Saturday." "The Work of the New York Kehillah, Salient Points of the Executive Committees' Report," *American Hebrew*, May 1, 1914, 5, From Polland, 17. So while the majority of store owners seem to be compromising strict religious dictates for financial reasons, Harris Levy continued to observe Jewish religious law and closed on Saturday.

BL: I went to NYU to study Business with the idea of coming into the store and however uh, the war came along. And I, enlisted in the Merchant Marine Academy, King's Point, and I became an officer in the Merchant Marine and I was sailing, and I was having a great time, sailing around the world (*laughs*) but at that point my- they were having problems with the union, and my father said I think you ought to come to the store, and of course not questioning it, that's where I ended my Merchant Marine career and came into the store. And I was in the store from 1946 to 19-

Lorraine Levy: 97

BL: 97. So it's 51 years.

[Music: *I Wish There Was a Wireless to Heaven*]

BL: I often describe the business almost as a living entity that becomes a part of your life and of your family and I think there might be a certain amount of that that rubs off on everybody, because it's uh,

LL: because of the deep involvement of the family, in the store.

This is the first time I heard a family business described as something that is alive, like another child. Modern business schools talk about businesses as living organisms. Bill's emotional connection to the business is like a paternal love, yet there is a kind of frustration about the large personal sacrifices he has made.

Bill ran the business with a cousin, with lots of help from his uncles, sisters, and wife, everyone pitched in to help the business. And they had many customers. Not neighborhood people, but Jews and gentiles who would venture to the neighborhood on a special trip.⁴¹

BL: This area was known as lower end... people of that didn't have a lot of, uh, money to spend, you might say.

[Music: *Mr. Success*]

We used to get Chauffeur driven cars down here,

[overlapping audio track: Jane Fonda]

we'd see people and we did have as we mentioned before, some of the finest trade you could think of.

[overlapping audio track: Frank Sinatra uh, wife,

LL:wife]

⁴¹ I understand that this term may be used pejoratively, but here it is used to refer to non-Jewish people, similar to the use in English translations of the Bible. The Jewish Encyclopedia defines "gentile" as "a word of Latin origin (from "gens"; "gentilis"), designating a people not Jewish, commonly applied to non-Jews." From "Gentile: Meaning of the Term," <http://jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=142&letter=G&search=Gentile#523>.

**Aside from some of the people I mentioned who were celebrities,
[overlapping audio track: Walter Mondale, who was a former Vice President-
presidential candidate...]**

**we had many people that were very wealthy that you might not know the
names of...**

BL: Abe Ribicoff who was a Governor, and

LL: And um, Rex Harrison

BL: So we had the cream of the crop and uh, thank God.

LL: Tony Fields

**BL: (Laughs) Nobody would remember- many names that people of the
current generation would not recognize. But we had a cross section of Who's
Who in America.**

LZ: What would be a good day in the store for you? What does that mean?

LL: No aggravation and money in the register! (Laughs).

The Levy's love talking about their busy "good old days." They show me pictures of the store and thank you letters from famous customers. They tell me that generations of customers would come to buy their wedding trousseau, their dowry. The store would have so many customers on Sundays, they had to keep people on the sidewalk. Bill showed me a picture from the 1980s in the store, when it was so busy they had a security guard at the door.

**We used to have to let people, as they walked out, he would let some people
come in. That was in our heyday when uh, I don't think we're ever going to
see that again.⁴²**

**One time there was a customer who was in the store, and she thought there
was a full carton and then she got tired I guess, and although we did have
some chairs, but she decided to sit on the carton, and she fell into the carton
(laughs) and all you could see were two legs sticking up. (Laughs).**

LL: We still laugh about that. (Laughs).

BL: So, but there were good times, and there were some bad times.

[Music: *Yiddishe Meydale*]

⁴² Bill's life stage as a senior citizen is generally associated with reflection, according to Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development. The final life stage is seen as a time when some individuals look back with satisfaction and integrity. This may explain his tendency to see the height of his career as the height of the store's success. From "Stage Eight: Maturity," In Erik Erikson's Eight Stages of Psychosocial Development, <http://web.cortland.edu/andersmd/ERIK/stage8.HTML>.

BL: In the fifty odd years that I was active in the business, we've seen a lot of people come and go, a lot of businesses that were there when I was there are no longer in existence- Alexander's, Gimball's, Depenna's,

LL: Altman's

BL: Altman's

LL: A and S

BL: A and S are no longer in existence and thank God we've been able to

LL: Hearn's

BL: thrive and succeed.

Somehow or another the experience [that] I had in the store I felt from the time that I went into the store it was going to be the same throughout my whole lifetime and it would always be there, and we would be conducting business pretty much the same way. We had started doing business with some of these mills and we had been doing business with them for years upon years, maybe thirty, forty years, with the same mills, *pfft*.

It was maybe ten years ago that things started to turn both in the neighborhood that we were in and the way that business was because a lot of the mills went out of business. The neighborhood changed where we had a tremendous influx of Chinese, where Chinatown spilled over into our area, and so that didn't help any, because they weren't customers that would normally deal with us.⁴³

The events of September 11, 2001 hit them pretty hard because they had to close for a couple days, and they couldn't get deliveries for weeks.

[Music: *Yiddishe Meydale*]

Bob Levy has been active in the Lower East Side Business Improvement District, and his parents say he has been working hard to improve the climate for small businesses. So now there are 4 generations of Harris Levy, a fact that Bill is happy to report.

Bill Levy: Well, we're very, very proud of the fact that we survived for four generations. I think that that's very rare, very unusual, uh, I never uh, pushed my son to to come into business after me, I think he felt almost, that it was almost an obligation to keep up the tradition, he happens to be colorblind (*laughs*) which is certainly a big strike against him, but fortunately, true to the tradition, his wife came into the business, she pitched in, and she's, for the most part, running a good deal of the business, and does

⁴³ Bob Levy says that the neighborhood significantly changed “15 years ago when the sovereignty of Hong Kong was given to China. This yielded a sudden large immigration of many classes of Hong Kong natives to the United States and the Lower East Side in particular.” (Personal communication, April 4, 2011)

all of the buying, and my son is very much interested in enabling the business to survive. It almost becomes like one of your children.

Bill is not sure if any of his grandchildren will go into the business. But it's clear that they hope it will continue. They are concerned with leaving a legacy of the family name. As an extension of their hopes for the future, they spend much of their time reaching into the past. They are amateur family genealogists, they have traveled to the massive archives collected by the Mormons in Salt Lake City. They are eager to trace their roots all the way back to Europe, the old country. I ask them why it's important to look into the past.

BL: I'm a traditionalist, I'm a person that believes in tradition. And being that, I'd like to know where I started from, and I think it's important for everybody to know

LL: It's a history.

BL: Yeah, hist....

LZ: Mmm.

BL: I guess in a sense that's why I'm bothering putting up with you. Because you're recording all of this for posterity. (Laughs).

[Music: *Bei Mir Bist Du Schoen*]

Walter Hernandez, the superintendent at the Eldridge Street synagogue, remembers a favorite store from his childhood in the Lower East Side.

[Music: *Mimizan*]

Walter Hernandez: **The Candy store, that was a little old fashioned... it wasn't even a big candy store, it was a small little candy store. And like he had the all the candies on one side, then in the back he had the soda machine, and then on one side he had all the potato chips. With a nickel (the prices!) you could come out of there with a big chocolate candy for a nickel. Oh I used to love that place. Jack was the old man, yeah. He had that place for years. I don't know, he must have been in the neighborhood ages, but then after a while, boom, he was gone. Didn't say nothing, nothing, everything-- the whole candy store, it just closed up. And he was gone, from one day to the next day. Yeah, that's how it happened. And then after that they started opening up bodegas and it started changing. Yeah, the neighborhood started changing a lot.**

[Music: *I Found a Whistle*]

Economy Candy is two doors down on Rivington from where my great grandfather's photography studio once was. Outside there's a great big logo of a happy child, a window full of candy and some faded snapshots of a boy and his father in front of the store. The inside is chock full of candy... packed from floor to ceiling with just about every sweet one has ever seen anywhere. Gummy bears, fake gum cigarettes, Chocolates from Germany. The sounds of classic rock. It's full of customers who are regulars and tourists, especially on a weekend. There are many employees stocking and sorting candy, teasing each other and having a good time. These are Lower East Side locals- mostly in their teens, Dominican Americans and Puerto Ricans. The owners Jerry Cohen and his wife Eileen are Jewish and they are often in the back, or at the register, or upstairs in the office—they're everywhere and hard to catch for a conversation. With persistence, I speak to Jerry in the middle of the floor. It's where he's most comfortable, he says, with his people. Jerry is a bearded, seemingly laid back guy with a weary look about him.

Jerry Cohen: **Jerry Cohen, we are at Economy Candy, 108 Rivington Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Our history is that we started in 1937. And it started out as a shoe store and during the War my father's brother in law's uncle- or father, uh he sold shoes and he used to get some candy on the side and he sold candy, and uh, the candy was outselling the shoes so they turned it into a candy store. And ever since then, we've been going along. We used to be located at 131 Essex, and we had stands outside and old- an old store, wind and uh, rain and snow.**

JC: I remember coming down as a kid, you know, working with him in the store, and um, being with him all of the time, I mean it was a different neighborhood then, you know, back in the 50s when I was growing up here, there were like eight, nine candy stores. There were plenty of people, there were cops walking the beat, there was no Costco, there was no Walmart, there was no K-Mart, people came down to shop, it was a different-- it was a neighborhood shopping area.⁴⁴

Liza Zapol: So, at that time were you living in the Lower East Side, or were you living elsewhere?

JC: At the time I was born we were living on Ludlow Street, right around the corner from the store, and then we moved into Queens.

LZ: Do you remember the house on Ludlow Street?

JC: No, I don't no- I was a- apparently I was just a few days old when we moved. My father told me a story that once I came into life, everything turned around for him, and the family became very prosperous.

JC: My father used to drive in every day, I mean the commute was ten minutes. But he'd get up at 6 o'clock in the morning, get to the store at a quarter after 6, and go back to sleep in the car for a half an hour. And the officer, the cops that used to be on the beat here, they'd come in and wake him up saying, "Moyshe- go! It's time to open up the store!"

[Under next section]

JC: Holidays, Passover, Easter Baskets, you know, child labor!

Jerry told me that he was born working in the store, that he and his sisters used to work there, and laughingly called it child labor. This business, like Streit's Matzo and Harris Levy, operated on a family economy, but Jerry uses love and family closeness as a way to explain the fact that the whole family worked so much.

JC: But the only time to be with your family, you know I always wanted to be with my father. And he was a workaholic and it was being with him. You know, like he'd get up to go to work and I'd try to be with him and so he wouldn't forget me I'd be sitting by the door all dressed up to say take me with him to work.

LZ: So even if he wasn't expecting to take you, you'd be there.

JC: I'd be waiting, Sorry, Dad, I'm here!

JC: We were on the corner of 131 Essex, my father had his whole outside stand, like six stands, tons of candies, chocolate bars, nuts, everything and inside the store we had dried fruits and some warm nuts and boxed

⁴⁴ Costco, Walmart, and K-Mart are some of the largest discount retail stores in America. In the late 1980s and 1990s, these stores grew exponentially in size and number, and in profits.

chocolates and my uncle was inside, my father was outside, my mom was inside, and my sisters would, you know, after school they'd come in, and we'd do a lot- you know funny thing is, you know, going back, you know, we used to pack a lot of stuff, pack bags, and we'd get a twenty-five pound case of cashews and we'd have to put them into one pound bags or something and for some reason, we'd only used to get twenty-four pounds out of each box, because every time we'd just sit and eat and eat and eat and eat and eat. But uh, you know, it was just a family thing, actually every store, wherever you went into, um, was family. It was all generations there, working. We weren't the only family business around. Across the street there was a clothing store that had their family, next door to us was a dairy, they had the kids working there too.

JC: It really wasn't competition, there was enough for everybody. I mean you'd come down on a Sunday and it was loaded with people down here, there was enough business for everybody, nobody stepped on each other's foot, you know because they'd need one- a store needed a case of cashews, of course, could I borrow a case of cashews till Tuesday, of course! You know, everybody worked together, it wasn't uh, a cut throat thing.

LZ: So you chose to go into the business. Tell me that story.

JC: I didn't choose to go into the business. I had a - you know, I was a very lazy kid growing up, you know I went to many colleges, you know, and I had a ball growing up, you know I got my first car, went cross country, dad, give me this, that, you know, I had whatever I wanted. And uh, finally my father said to me, you know, what are you doing? I said I don't know. Well, you're coming into the business, and that was it.

LZ: can you explain to me what your connection is to the Lower East Side?

JC: You're trying to keep the neighborhood going. A lot of these stores, they come in, you don't know if they are going to stay a year, or two years, and that's it, they're out. But I'm here, till the future, I'm building a future for my son to carry on, you do want the neighborhood to stay alive, you do want a clean street, you do want a clean neighborhood.

JC: The stores that come in now, it's only bars and uh, restaurants and it's not the same.

[Music: *Ludlow St.*]

Rivington Street and the blocks north towards Houston have changed considerably in the last decade. Wall Street brokers and young professionals have moved to the neighborhood, following the vibrant nightlife. Just across the street from Economy Candy is the Hotel on Rivington, a 400 dollar-a-night high rise that was built in 2004, bringing

tourists, and more investment in the neighborhood. On the flip side is less protection for the lower income population that owns businesses or rents in the neighborhood.

JC: **A lot, a lot of changes...**

LZ: **Has that affected the clientele and the life of the store?**

JC: **Well we don't have the local people coming down as much because they've been chased out because of the rents, they can't afford the rents, and what's coming now are the people who can pay top dollar, which are the bars, and they don't open their stores till 8-9 o'clock and there's no retail trade anymore, so there's very, very few stores that are open during the day.**

LZ: **So you've seen a lot of these stores close that you were talking about before.**

JC: **A lot of the stores, if they didn't own the building, they didn't own the property, they're gone! Or the kids didn't want to take over the business, went into other fields, they're gone!**

[Music: *Ludlow St.*:

On Ludlow Street

Faces are changing on Ludlow Street

Yuppies invading on Ludlow Street

Night life is raging on Ludlow Street

History's fading.

And it's hard... to just move along.^{45]}

Jerry owns the building at 108 Rivington—he bought it when the landlord at his father's corner store asked for triple rent, and he wanted a longer-term solution to the problem of rising rent. The fact that he owns the land may be what's kept him in the neighborhood through the years. Jerry spoke about the neighborhood in the 1970s and 1980s. During this period there were many shuttered buildings and closed businesses, which brought squatters, artists and musicians seeking cheap rent into the neighborhood.⁴⁶

JC: **Back in the 70s it was, drugs- every corner you could buy drugs over here. It was- you'd be afraid to walk out on the street, and theft, you know, we used to have stands outside, people would just pick up a case and just run with it! I mean, we had to take matters in our own hands, we'd have a**

⁴⁵ Julian Casablancas, *Ludlow Street*, Phrases for the Young, RCA/JIVE, a division of Sony, 2009.

⁴⁶ "During the 1960s and 1970s, the Lower East Side was regarded by many as one of the most undesirable places to live in the city. According to some, the neighborhood was blighted and decaying, plagued by crime and drug abuse and littered with abandoned buildings and vacant lots." During the 1980s, Middle class artists and students began to move to the area, and in the decade from 1995-2005 "the Lower East Side has lost over 8,000 units of low-income housing, with a simultaneous loss of residents in the lowest income group and an increase of those in the highest income group." From "Gentrification," Tenement Museum Encyclopedia, http://www.tenement.org/encyclopedia/housing_gentrification.htm#one.

baseball bat underneath the counter, it wasn't happy times. But those days are gone.

LZ: I want to just ask you one question about the very beginning, so your father's brother-in-law's father started the store, and was that an immigrant family?

JC: I don't know, my father doesn't remember anything, and there's no one left in the family to get any information out of. And I don't even know why they called it Economy Candy and it just goes on, we're just carrying on the tradition. You know one nice thing is my son will be coming into the business in about three years, and he'll continue and he'll have his changes, you know?

LZ: How did that happen and what is your feeling about that?

JC: Oh it's wonderful, you know he's working now on Wall Street, a brokerage firm, doing very well, you know he's happy there, but he's married to the business, he's committed to them seven days a week, you know they walk around with their Blackberry's. Over here, he's his own boss, and he can do what he wants and no-one tells him what to do, um, and it's a happier environment. He'll have his.... You know my father worked seven days a week, I work six, he'll probably cut it down to four days a week. These kids today. But- you know whatever he wants, I'm not going to leave him, I'll be here with him. But he'll run the show.

LZ: Did he grow up in the store as well?

JC: He grew up in the store too,

Mitchell Cohen: I've been coming into the store ever since I was born in 1985, came in, was brought in on the weekends with my parents when I they had to work.

That's Mitchell Cohen, Jerry's son.

MC: About when I was five, six years old, I really started trying to learn about the business as much as I could at that young of an age and would stand behind the counter and help my dad, you know, just fill up bags with stuff, and as he rang it up put it in bags for people. And I'd stand on a milk carton next to the register and just try to watch him work. And you know, as I got older he'd have me learn how to use the register, how to weigh things, how to deal with customers, and even make me try to figure out people's change, not even use the register, try to teach me math when I was really young, even though the line might have been really long I'd still have to figure out how much change to give to give back when someone gave me a 10 on a 9 dollar and 40 cent purchase.

LZ: Talk to me about what it is to be in the same place as your father and grandfather were. What does that mean to you?

MC: It's great. I mean, you have people who will say "I remember when your dad was that small, your dad was your age, I remember when you were a kid." People feel like they're a part of the family and they like to feel that way, they're like "oh I remember when you were little and used to work behind the counter, oh, I remember when you were Bar Mitzvahed, I remember when you got into college, and now, how's Morgan Stanley?" Everyone knows about you and your family. And it's nice to hear, and it's nice to hear the stories of what they remember when my dad was running around the store and helping my grandfather. So it's really nice to hear when that happens.

LZ: Candy's a nostalgic food right? So like you talk about, people say oh when I was a kid I used to have that, so it has a particular cache. And I'm also thinking like, the Lower East Side has that for some people, particularly for Jewish people whose family came through here. Do you find that, in terms of customers that come here?

MC: I think, you know, there are a lot of old time customers who remember the neighborhood and talk about it a lot, and say oh I remember when I used to pay a nickel for this and now it's three dollars, right, so you hear those stories, and it's sad that you see it going away, because sadly that generation is going past us now, and stories are going to have to be told by their grandkids. That's what's nice about when you see people bringing in their kids and their kid's kids and it really touch when they're like "oh my grandmother told me when she used to come here," and hopefully that will keep on, especially here in the Lower East Side.

Mitchell's not sure when or how he will take over the business, but he's sure he wants the legacy to go on. He insists that the business will keep serving the neighborhood and will employ locals who need work, and supply kids and adults with their favorite sweets. He reminds me that once there were many candy stores in the neighborhood, and Economy Candy is the last one standing.

[Music: *Snow on Dead Neighborhoods*]

MC: And to be really the last one left. Um you don't want to lose that. It's our family business. And you really don't want to see that go away, and the history and the history and the tradition. So no matter what, we'll keep it going. We'll figure something out. I can't see it going away. I can't see letting that happen.

For each of these narrators, for the men at Streit's Matzo, Bill and Lorraine at Harris Levy Linens, and Jerry and his son at Economy Candy, the family story is incredibly important. The story of the businesses are ones that each teller has unavoidably been woven into, with the help of their grandparents, parents, and other relatives. They only have to wave their hand in the air, or point to the ground beneath them to explain their connection to their past. You can hear this memory and nostalgia in the way the Aaron Gross and Alan Adler talk about Streit's Matzo.

AA: Just walking the halls, seeing how the matzo's coming out of the machine...

AG: And also to be just walking in the same halls, walking in the same rooms that my great grandfather, great great grandfather walked around in...

For these business owners, place is a link between generations, to the history of the business, to personal memories and the memories of those who came before. By sharing the same space it seems that memories live longer. By holding on to the space of the business, the memory of each individual lives longer.⁴⁷

The memories that we have heard reflect dreams, desires, hopes, fears, identities, differences.⁴⁸ Jerry's closeness to his father may be why he went into the family business:

JC: I was always in the business, you know, I was always by my father's side, next to his... you know in his apron, working outside.... And you, know, my mother outside, my sisters inside doing their thing. You know, we were here!

Bill and Lorraine speak of the businesses as a living child, while at the same time they are mourning the loss of the past.

BL: In the fifty odd years that I was active in the business, we've seen a lot of people come and go, a lot of businesses that were there when I was there are no longer in existence.

These businesses are located in a place that has been conceived as the origin for Jewish American cultural identity. This is a part of what the stores are selling. These families recognize that it is some of their draw, how they make their living, why they are still there. And their stories are also about making a living:

⁴⁷ Many of these ideas of mortality, family, identity and time come from a personal conversation with Luisa Passerini, on April 20, 2011.

⁴⁸ "Practices of remembrance are questions of and for history as a force of inhabitation, as the way we live with images and stories that intertwine with our sense of limits and possibilities, hopes and fears, identities and distinctions." From Roger I. Simon, *The Touch of the Past: Remembrance, Learning, and Ethics*. (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 3.

AA: I guess in some ways that really is the story of the family business. So in addition to doing a mitzvah and proving Jews with the Matzo they need for Passover, it's also the way to put bread on the table.

So, keeping a family business in the Lower East Side is about making a living. It's also about memory, obligations to family, and a sense of belonging.

[Music: *Snow on Dead Neighborhoods*]

I walk the streets of the Lower East Side now and hear the layers of time, story, and space.⁴⁹ At the corner of Rivington and Essex, I can imagine Jerry as a child tagging along behind his father at the outdoor stands. Walking by Streit's Matzo, I hear the rhythms of the old Matzo machines, counting time. And somewhere near Hester Street, Bill's grandmother calls people to her pushcart.

Alan Adler: **Work in the store**

Walter Hernandez: **to the store**

Bill Levy: **the business**

Jerry Cohen: **the store**

Lorraine Levy: **the family in the store**

Aaron Gross: **the business**

Alan Adler: **The story of the family business**

Mitchell Cohen: **it's our family business.**

We have heard a particular construction of the American Jewish Lower East Side. There are many more stories in the Lower East Side- many other ethnic groups and related businesses. If you are in New York, I encourage you to explore the area and learn about these other groups too.

[Music: *Eastside Gluckstern's Restaurant Commercial*]

⁴⁹Stories have the ability to navigate space. Michel de Certeau writes: "Stories... traverse and organize places; they link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories." From Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 115.

MAPS AND IMAGES



Map of the Lower East Side, from About.com
http://gonyc.about.com/od/manhattan/l/bl_lowereast.htm

פאלייא בראדער'ס סטודיא,
141 ריווינגטאן סטריט.

פאלייא בראדער'ס סטודיא,
104 ריווינגטאן סטריט.

פאלייא בראדער'ס סטודיא,
1672 יעקסענסטאן עוועניו.

**וואו
ווארנט איהר ?**

אין יעדען טהייל עסטאט קענט
איהר זיך לאזען פאטאגראפירען
פון א פאלייא.

3 פאטאגראף נאללער'ס.
4 ברוידער ארטוסטען.
11 יעהרענע עטאבלישמענט רעפארמאציע.
100 טויזענד צופרייערענע
קאסטומער'ס.

**פאלייא...
בראדער'ס**

פאטאגראפער'ס.



HERMAN PALEY,
PHOTOGRAPHER AND BUSINESS MANAGER
FOR
PALEY'S STUDIOS.



SAMUEL PALEY,
ARTIST AND PHOTOGRAPHER,
IS AT
1672 LEXINGTON AVENUE.



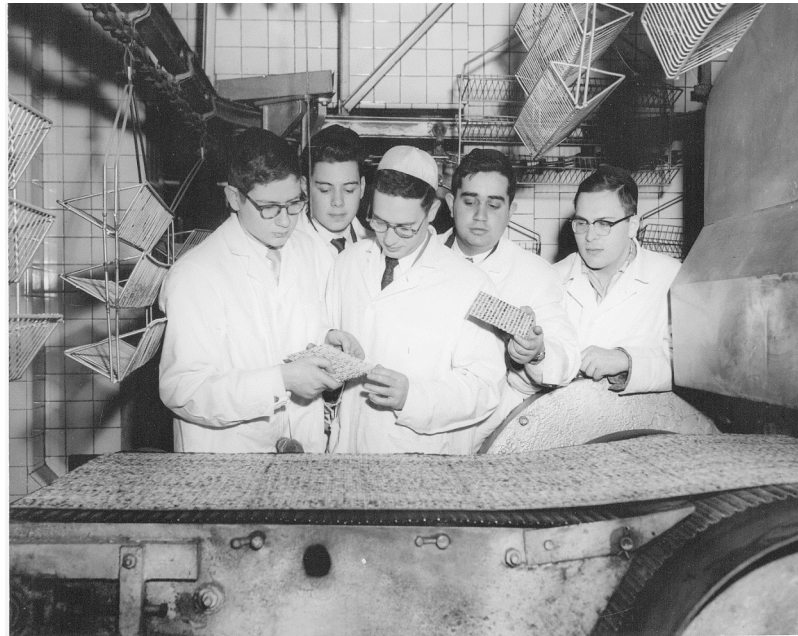
NICHOLAS PALEY,
ARTIST AND PHOTOGRAPHER,
IS AT
104 RIVINGTON STREET.



ISRAEL PALEY,
ARTIST AND PHOTOGRAPHER,
ALWAYS AT
141 DIVISION STREET.

Above: Advertisement for the Paley Brother's Photography Studios.
Below: Corner of Rivington and Orchard Streets, circa 1900.





Above: Streit's Matzo factory, 1950s,
Below: Harris Levy founders.
Bottom, from left: Bob Levy, Bill Levy, and their cousin, 1990s.





Storefront of Economy Candy, 2011.

GLOSSARY

Bialy: A bialy is a like a bagel, but it has no hole, instead it has “an indented center well that is ringed by a softer higher rim, all generously flecked with toasted onions and... a showering of poppy seeds.”⁵⁰

Dor: (From Aramaic) Generation; place.

Mitzvah: In the Jewish religion, Mitzvah means God’s commandment, or religious law, which includes Kosher law. It has also come to mean “a good deed.”

Puller: Someone who drags passerby into a store. “Pullers... were unusually assertive. The pullers tried not to grab a potential customer too hard because doing so might tear his clothes, but the grip had to be firm enough so that he could not escape the grip.”⁵¹ Also referred to as a *shlepper*.

Shlepped: (Yiddish) Dragged.

Shmattes: (Yiddish) Rags; cloth of any kind. Also refers to the garment industry.

Sufghaniot: A special Jelly filled Hannukah doughnut.

⁵⁰ From Sheraton, *The Bialy Eaters*, 2.

⁵¹ From Epstein, *At the Edge of a Dream*, 74.

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