

Back to the Future

A trip to the new Lower East Side.

by Rob Eshman, Editor-in-Chief

"Just when I thought that I was out, they pull me back in."

I'm standing on the balcony of a boutique hotel in New York's Lower East Side, looking down on Orchard Street, having a "Godfather" moment. I am three generations removed from the Eshmans — no kidding — and Peshkins who lived and shopped and ate and shlepped on the very streets below me. But some reason keeps me coming back to this neighborhood on my visits to Manhattan. It feels familiar and foreign, strange and comforting. It is the remnant of the shtetl and the beginnings of the metropolis, the last breath of old Europe and the excitement of America. And on and on.

Back up a second. Did I say I was in a boutique hotel on the Lower East Side? Yes.

Three years ago, I was making my regular pilgrimage to Yonah Schimmel's Knishes and Guss' Pickles and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, when I came across something that was then rare on Orchard Street: a clean storefront. I peeped inside and saw a man in a fedora directing what appeared to be the mother of all renovations. Randy Settenbrino greeted me and gave me a tour of his still-aborning dream: The Blue Moon Hotel.

You hear about people like Settenbrino all the time — the kind of guy who gets an idea, like launching a rocket or building an ark or swimming a channel — and then, no matter the odds, the time, the cost, he just does it.

Settenbrino came upon one of the neighborhood's crumbling tenement buildings a

century of detritus, then renovating every last plaster wall, banister and elevator shaft. He peeled off the fire escape, had a new cornice built, added three stories and gutted every thing else. He named it The Blue Moon Hotel, after a resort his family had once owned on Coney Island.

An artist by avocation, he used much of the *objets trouvées* in the basement to decorate. The walls are lined with collages made from old magazines and colorful table cards. The lobby is tastefully done in period furniture — a pre-World War I Coca-Cola vending machine and an 1898 soapstone sink. The front desk is made from leftover spindles and banisters.

Among the basement treasures: a tourist map of New York City, circa 1928, which Settenbrino framed and displayed. "It's like the building was begging to be a hotel," he said.

I asked him how much he spent on his dream. "It cost me five years of my life," he said. "I started three kids and three bank loans ago."

The result is a spotless five-story, 22-room hotel in which, as Settenbrino dreamed, guests can enjoy the flavor of the Lower East Side in style. March rates range from \$250 (weekdays)/\$280 (weekends) for a 320-square-foot room to \$549 (weekdays)/\$599 (weekends) for a luxury 700-square-foot suite. Breakfast is served in the light-filled lobby — coffee, fresh local bialys and rugalach. Still to come is a kosher restaurant in the lobby, which Settenbrino, who is Orthodox, points out — with some irony — is much needed in the once-Jewish neighborhood.

Each room or suite bears the name of a well-known neighborhood alumni: there's the Al Jolson suite, the Sophie Tucker room, etc. We stayed in the Molly Picon suite. The bathrooms have whirlpool tubs, chic white tile and chrome fittings, while the suites themselves feature two large separate rooms, a flat-screen TV — something I think the Peshkins did without — and a 16-foot balcony from where I could look down on the ghosts of Orchard Street.

"Every Jew in the world had an ancestor in the Lower East Side," Settenbrino told me. "Everybody wants to know where their zayde or tante or bubbe lived. It's like going 100 years back in time."

Except that it's not.

Two of the families at breakfast one morning were non-Jewish tourists who found the hotel through Google. They weren't suffering, like me, from an advanced case of nostalgia. Both said they liked the Blue Moon's "European feel" and hip location.

That's right, hip.

In the time it took Settenbrino to realize The Blue Moon Hotel, the Lower East Side has come alive.

We used it as a base to explore the old synagogues, the Tenement Museum just across the street and Chinatown and Little Italy within walking distance.

But after decades of crime and neglect, Orchard Street and the immediate environs have been discovered by Manhattan's gentrifying vanguard of artists, foodies and clubsters. Just



Overlooking Orchard Street. Photo by Rob Eshman

down from The Blue Moon is The Orchard, where the acclaimed (non-kosher) entrees start at around \$30. There's the open-late Cafe Chambon, Clinton Street Baking Co., Falai Panetteria, Internet cafés and — my favorite — Il Laboratorio di Gelato, a boutique ice cream store just across from the boutique Blue Moon Hotel.

Visitors nostalgic for the old neighborhood can still find deals at Friedman's Hosiery and other now-disappearing shmata outlets. We still had a pickle from the barrels at Guss' and still caught a whiff from Katz's Famous Deli-

catessen.

But on the Lower East Side, thanks to The Blue Moon Hotel and its new neighbors, nostalgia ain't what it used to be.

And I, for one, am not complaining.

For more information and links to The Blue Moon and other locations, visit jewishjournal.com.



A poetic commentary on the Lower East Side. Photo by Rob Eshman

few years back and envisioned a beautiful, upscale hotel. The place had housed generations of mostly Jewish and Italian immigrants in dark, crowded, bathroom-less conditions from 1895 to 1936. Then Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia decreed that owners had to meet stricter codes, and the landlord simply closed off the residential floor and rented out the storefront. "The place became a virtual time capsule," Settenbrino said.

He bought it and set about cleaning out a



Pre-World War I Coca-Cola vending machine in the lobby of the Blue Moon Hotel. Photo by Rob Eshman