

## Lower East Side Tenement Museum Recreates Life in New York for Immigrants 100 Years Ago – This Is America



To learn more about the Tenement Museum, visit their web site:  
<http://www.tenement.org/>

From VOA Learning English, welcome to This Is America. I'm Steve Ember. Today, Bob Doughty and Faith Lapidus tell the story of a very special museum in New York City -- a museum that celebrates the people from different nations who came to the United States to live, many years ago. Come along with us!

The Lower East Side Tenement Museum is one of the smaller museums in New York. It lets visitors experience how early immigrants to the United States lived. The museum is a building at Ninety-Seven Orchard Street. It was built in 1863 by a German immigrant named Lucas Glockner. He worked as a tailor making clothes before investing his money to develop a property.

His tenement building was one of many built in New York as a way to profit from the increasing demand for housing for immigrants.

The word “tenement” comes from a Latin word meaning “to hold.” A tenement building holds many rooms where different families lived.

The word is not used much anymore in the United States. When people use the word today, they mean an old crowded building where poor families live in terrible, unhealthy conditions. But in the 1800s, the word “tenement” simply meant a building in which many families lived.

Later, many immigrant families improved their living conditions by moving from the Lower East Side to other areas of New York. Some lived in the same kinds of buildings, but the living areas were cleaner and larger. They did not want to call them tenements, so they called them apartment buildings instead.

History experts say more than half the people in New York lived in tenements in 1863.

The building at 97 Orchard Street shows the kind of spaces where families lived. The front room was the largest. It was the only one with a window. Behind it were a kitchen for cooking and a small bedroom for sleeping. The apartment had no running water, and no bathroom, toilet or shower. There were six places where people left their body wastes in the back yard, next to the only place to get drinking water. Such unhealthy conditions led to the spread of disease.

Over the years, New York City officials passed laws to improve conditions in the tenements. The owners of 97 Orchard Street placed gas lighting in the building in the 1890s.

They added water and indoor toilets in 1905, and electric power in 1924. Then they refused to make any more improvements. They closed the building in 1935. In 1998, the federal government declared the building a protected National Historic Place.

Museum officials researched the history of the building and its 20 apartments. They found more than two thousand objects that belonged to people who lived there. These include kitchen devices, medicine bottles, letters, newspapers, money and pieces of cloth. They also learned the histories of many of the seven thousand people from more than 20 countries who lived there. And they spoke with and recorded memories of people who lived at 97 Orchard Street as children.

Museum officials used this information to re-create some of the apartments as they would have looked during different time periods in the building's history.

These apartments are what people see when they visit the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. Let us join one of the guided visits. First we climb several flights of worn stairs. It is a very hot day and we feel the heat in the dark, narrow hallway.

Now we enter the apartment of the Gumpertz family. They were Jews from Germany who lived here in the 1870s. On October seventh, 1874, Julius Gumpertz dressed for work, left the building and never returned. He left his wife Nathalie and their four children, ages eight months to seven years.

Mrs. Gumpertz was forced to support her children by making clothing in the apartment. She earned about eight dollars a week. This was enough to pay for the apartment each month and send her children to school. The apartment has a sewing machine and other tools similar to those Nathalie Gumpertz used in her work. She made the largest room into her workspace. That was where she saw people who wanted clothes made or repaired.

The next apartment we visit belonged to the Baldizzi family. They came from Italy and were Catholic. Adolfo Baldizzi, his wife Rosaria and their two children moved to Orchard Street in 1928. Their daughter Josephine liked to help other people. Every Friday night she would turn on the lights in the nearby apartment of the Rosenthal family. The Rosenthals could not turn on the lights themselves because it was the start of the Jewish holy day and no work was permitted.

Here is a recording of Josephine Baldizzi. She tells how she felt each week when she saw Mrs. Rosenthal in the window motioning for her to come and turn on the lights:

“It made me very proud to have to do that. I used to feel good that she chose me to do that job for her. And I can still see her till today—the vision of her in that window. It has never left my memory.”

Now we visit the apartment of the Rogarshevsky family of Lithuania. They moved to 97 Orchard Street between 1907 and 1910.

Abraham and Fannie Rogarshevsky had six children. Abraham developed the disease tuberculosis and died in 1918.

Fannie Rogarshevsky was faced with the same problem as Nathalie Gumpertz. What could she do to support her family and continue to live in the apartment? She got the building owner to let her clean apartments and do other work in exchange for rent.

Mrs. Rogarshevsky stayed in this building and cleaned its rooms even after the other renters were forced out in 1935. She moved out of 97 Orchard and into a nearby public housing project in 1941.

Now we enter the apartment of the Levine family. They were Jews from Poland. Jennie and Harris Levine moved into the building in the early 1890s. They lived there for more than 10 years. During that time, Mrs. Levine gave birth to four children. Her husband and his workers produced clothing in the front room.

We see the room as it looked after the workers had gone home at the end of the day. We hear stories about the many immigrants who have worked in the clothing industry in New York.

Still another apartment is an example of living history. It belonged to the Confino family in 1916. Abraham and Rachel Confino came to New York from Turkey. They were Sephardic Jews, people whose ancestors had been born in Spain, North Africa or Middle Eastern countries.

An actress who plays 13-year-old Victoria Confino welcomes us. She tells about Victoria's experience living in the building. Here, she explains the language of Sephardic Jews, called Ladino, and sings part of a sad Ladino song:

*"Oh, it's a very mixed up language. It's like a little bit Spanish...we call it Judeo Espagnol...and it's a little bit Turkish, a little bit Hebrew...a lot of languages mixed up all together."*

Writer Jane Ziegelman recently published a book that explores food culture from the point of view of five families who lived at 97 Orchard Street. Her book is called "97 Orchard: An Edible History of Five Immigrant Families in One New York Tenement."

Jane Ziegelman explores the many food traditions that German, Irish, Italian and other immigrants brought with them to the United States. And she shows how these food traditions have influenced American cooking.

For example, Germans brought the tradition of pale beer to the United States. She also discusses a German restaurant in New York that served a meat dish known as "Hamburger steak." This meal would evolve into what is now considered a truly American food, the hamburger.



Ms. Ziegelman suggests that the Irish were less protective of their food traditions. This is because they came from a country filled with poverty and the effects of failing potato harvests. She says Italians felt very strongly about the quality of their food. They were happy to pay more to have oils, dried vegetables and tomato products imported from their homeland.

Jane Ziegelman says from the 19th century on, immigrants would take difficult jobs that non-immigrants would not do. These include working as food sellers, beer brewers, bakers, butchers and restaurant servers. Her book helps show how important the hard work of immigrants was in feeding America.

This program was written by Nancy Steinbach and Dana Demange, who was also the producer. Our program was voiced by Bob Doughty and Faith Lapidus. And I'm Steve Ember, inviting you to join us again next week for This is America, from VOA Learning English.