

# On the Lower East Side: Twenty-Eight Remarkable Women... and One Scoundrel

Portraits by Adrienne Ottenberg

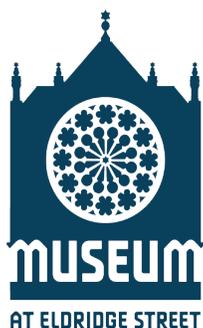


This exhibition celebrates twenty-eight remarkable women—and one scoundrel—who lived or worked on the Lower East Side of New York at the turn of the twentieth century. Each portrait, printed on a silk or cotton banner, floats over a scrim of street maps where the women once walked. What was the neighborhood like then? It was overcrowded, yet vibrant. It was where the Old World met the new. It was fertile ground for social, political, and artistic innovation. Poverty and crime were common, but there was hope for something better. These ground-breaking women reach out through time and speak to us today. They were responsible for laws and attitudes we take for granted: the eight-hour workday, child labor laws, a woman's right to vote. They contributed to the cultural and social life of the community. They made headlines. Their contributions connect us to this place, the Lower East Side. Pick a woman to be curious about. Find out what she faced and what she accomplished. Let her surprise and inspire you.

👉 This exhibition is accompanied by an audio guide. Download the **Bloomberg Connects** app using the QR code on the back cover of this booklet to access the guide. 🗨️

*“St Augustine says, ‘the dead are invisible, they are not absent.’ You needn’t believe in ghosts to see that’s true. We carry the genes and the culture of our ancestors, and what we think about them shapes what we think of ourselves, and how we make sense of our time and place.”*

Hilary Mantel,  
Reith Lectures



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[eldridgestreet.org](http://eldridgestreet.org)



## Entrance

### Elizabeth Tyler (dates unknown, active early 1900s) Nurse



Elizabeth was one of the first Black nurses in America. In 1906, she was hired by Lillian Wald as the first nurse of color at the Henry Street Settlement. She had to overcome discrimination from those she worked with and those she served. Tuberculosis was a deadly killer at that time and undaunted, she went on to establish the Stillman House Settlement on Manhattan's west side, providing health care and other services to an African American community that was ravaged by the disease.

### Gittel Natelson (1844-1903) Entrepreneur



Gittel was a member of the Eldridge Street Synagogue, and operated the mikvah (ritual bath) at 5 Allen Street that served the women of the congregation. She was also a wigmaker for Orthodox women who traditionally cover their heads after marriage. Gittel made it possible for them to maintain their religious tradition, giving them a sense of stability in their new country, which had little understanding or sympathy for them.

### Lillian Wald (1867-1940) Nurse



Lillian became a nurse during an exciting moment in the history of medicine. The discovery of germ theory, theories of disease transmission, X-rays, and the concept of preventative medicine were all taking shape. She was able to bring effective treatments to the poor immigrants crowding into the Lower East Side. She created the Henry Street Settlement to provide health services, and also fought for housing regulations, worker protections, child labor laws, nurses in schools, and women's suffrage.

## Back left wall

### Chinese Actor Benefit for Kishinev Pogrom



In 1903, a massacre of the Jewish community occurred in the town of Kishinev, in Eastern Europe. The world was aghast at the brutality of it. The Chinese community in New York City gave a benefit performance at the Chinese Theater on Doyers Street to raise money for the victims. The organizers and performers had also fled violence and war in China, but mostly men. The 'Page Act' kept almost all Chinese women out of the country. Since it was a Chinese tradition for men to play all the roles in a play, perhaps our actor is a man dressed as a woman. But maybe if more women had been here, a woman would have had a role in the play.

### Bessie Thomashefsky (1873-1962) Actor



Bessie was a star of Yiddish Theater, which was located on Second Avenue on the Lower East Side and known as Yiddish Broadway. She had drama on and off the stage, eventually leaving her famous husband Boris, who was philandering and misusing their earnings. She never divorced him, but went on to live her own life. She continued to be successful, taking over the management of the People's Theater at 199-201 Bowery, and producing plays that focused on women's issues including suffrage and birth control.

### Molly Picon (1898-1992) Actor



Molly was known for her impish charm and comic brilliance. Born on Broome Street she first appeared in vaudeville at age six. In the 1920s, she was dubbed "the sweetheart of Second Avenue," starring in hundreds of productions in the Yiddish theaters there. She had great staying power, and was in the 1971 film version of *Fiddler on the Roof* (she played Yentl) and the television series *Car 54, Where are You?* She brought Yiddish culture to a wider American audience.

## Front gallery wall

**Emma Lazarus (1849-1887)**

Poet



Emma was more than a poet. She was a feminist, a public intellectual, and an activist for the impoverished immigrants pouring into New York City. As a wealthy fourth-generation New Yorker,

descended from the first Sephardic Jews that settled in colonial Manhattan, she used her place in this privileged society to speak her mind. She visited immigrant refugee camps and wrote of the horrible conditions there for *American Hebrew Magazine*. Doing this broke all the unspoken rules about a young woman's place in society.

**Clarice Baright (1881-1961)**

Lawyer



Clarice was called the "Lady Angel of the Tenement District." She fought for the rights of New York City's children and poor while earning the distinction of serving as the second female judge in the

city's history and of being among the first few women admitted to the American Bar Association. She focused her law career on juvenile delinquency and wrote several books on the psychology of child crime. She was also the first to bring an official motion to demand female judges.

**Dora Welfowitz (1891-1911)**

Triangle Shirtwaist Factory



Dora, who lived at 11 Division Street, died in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. She had been in the United States for just a year. She worked 14-hour shifts among heaps of flammable fabrics

and tissue paper patterns. The workrooms were lit by open-flame gas lamps and the cutters, mostly men, were allowed to smoke as they worked. The fire broke out on March 25, 1911 at 4:30 p.m. on the eighth floor. The one elevator stopped working, stairwells were choked with smoke and fire, and the fire escape collapsed. One hundred and forty-six people died.

**Emma Goldman (1869-1940)**

Revolutionary



Emma lived her life fueled by passion. She argued for workers' rights, women's suffrage, and free love. She was arrested many times, barred from speaking, and was deported from the United

States in 1919 without a trial. Emma Goldman's insistence on the protection of free speech was influential, eventually leading to the creation of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). FBI director J. Edgar Hoover called her "the most dangerous woman in America."

**Mabel Kitteredge (1867-1955)**

Educator



Mabel was a society lady who could stay up all night playing bridge, and was also the creator of programs that taught immigrant girls how to manage a home and adapt to life in America. She also started a public

school hot lunch program in Hell's Kitchen, which soon expanded to the Lower East Side. She took into consideration the tastes and customs of those she served, and made the program a success. For a time she lived and worked at Henry Street Settlement.

**Frances Perkins (1880-1965)**

Political Activist



Frances was a social worker and an advocate for consumers. In 1911 she witnessed the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. The next week she heard Rose Schneiderman's

impassioned speech at a memorial meeting. Channeling her anger into action, she led the committee that investigated the fire. She fought for labor reforms. Eventually she became President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Secretary of Labor, the first-ever woman cabinet member. She brought her experience and commitment to using government to protect workers. It was a life of public good, but her private life was difficult.

## Back gallery wall

### Clara Lemlich (1886-1982)

#### Labor Leader



Clara was a passionate organizer of women and girls who toiled in the New York City garment factories. At age 23 she spoke at Cooper Union galvanizing New York factory workers to strike. This became known as the Uprising of the 20,000. Remarkably, after a long and consistent career, she was still organizing workers at her assisted living home until she died at 96.

### Belle Moskowitz (1877-1933)

#### Political Advisor



Belle never sought the limelight for herself. She started her working life as a social worker at the Educational Alliance in 1900, and went on to become a major political player for New York State. Al Smith, who became the Governor of New York and went on to run for president, made her his closest advisor. After her death, her papers were “cleaned up” and unfortunately we no longer have much record of her work.

### Mirele Poil (1870-1914)

#### Activist



Mirele was an immigrant and a factory worker. She became an activist and inspiration to her family and friends. The story of Mirele can be found in the book *Women of Their Times* written by her daughter Anna Galstuck.

### Pauline Newman (1890-1968)

#### Activist



Pauline played an essential role in the early twentieth-century tenant, labor, socialist, and working-class suffrage movements. At nine she was working in a hairbrush factory and by eleven was laboring in the notorious Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. In 1909 she helped organize the Uprising of the 20,000, and was the first female general organizer of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. She worked for the ILGWU for more than seventy years. In 1974, the Coalition of Labor Union Women honored her as a foremother of the women's liberation movement.

### Cora La Redd (1900-1968)

#### Dancer



Cora was born on Broome Street. This area was just south of “Little Africa,” a neighborhood in Greenwich Village that was known for “black and tan” establishments. This was the euphemism used for mixed-race tenements, shops, bars, and churches. Cora grew up to become a well-known singer and tap dancer. Her enjoyment of singing and dancing is evident in her short film *That's The Spirit* with Noble Sissle & Band.

### Rose Gollup Cohen (1880-1925)

#### Writer



Rose's life was a life of extremes: from the dangerous, persecuted life in a Russian shtetl, to the grim existence of a factory worker, as a domestic servant, then finally to acclaimed author. She was always wanting to know more, be more. With the publication of her autobiography, *Out of the Shadow*, she joined the intellectual and artistic luminaries of her day. But she ceased to write and died a mysterious, unexplained death.

### Rose Pastor Stokes (1879-1933)

#### Activist



Rose reinvented herself from immigrant factory worker to journalist, to political firebrand, to society wife. She was immersed in fighting for workers' rights, suffrage, and birth control. The press associated her with the myth of “Cinderella” for marrying the society scion James Graham Phelps Stokes. But Rose was not to be subsumed into any myth. She had ownership over her own romantic fate. At forty-seven she divorced her husband and married a twenty-nine-year-old Jewish scholar.

## Stairwell

**Fania Mindell (1894-1986)**

**Birth Control Activist**



Fania knew ignorance was not bliss. To have a better life girls and women needed to avoid unwanted pregnancy and venereal disease. She was one of the founders of the Brownsville Birth-Control Clinic in Brooklyn. Fania spoke 3 languages; Russian, Yiddish, and Italian. She made the birth control information accessible. Under the

Comstock Act, she was arrested and found guilty of distributing obscene material.

An excerpt from that “obscene” booklet:

“Every girl should first understand herself; she should know her anatomy, including sex anatomy; she should know the epochs of a normal woman’s life, and the unfoldment which each epoch brings; she should know the effect the emotions have on her acts, and finally she should know the fullness and richness of life when crowned by the flower of motherhood.”

*What Every Girl Should Know* by Margaret Sanger

**Zoe Anderson Norris (1860-1914)**

**Journalist**



Zoe was a master of disguise. She went undercover and then wrote about the mistreatment of the poor and immigrants. She was the founder of the Ragged Edge Klub, which enjoyed various locations, including Cafe Boulevard at 156 Second Ave. She knew how to party. The contrast of her rural Kentucky background and

the chaotic reality of the Lower East Side led her to create a magazine called *The East Side* “to fight for the poor with my pen.” Zoe wrote every word of the bimonthly magazine, pleading for political and social reform and for charitable aid. Its articles were syndicated by hundreds of newspapers across the country.

## Women’s Balcony right

**Mabel Ping-Hua Lee (1896-1966)**

**Suffragette**



Mabel took a stand for women’s suffrage at the age of 16, riding a horse to lead a 1912 parade on Fifth Avenue. Mabel mobilized the Chinese community in America to support the right to vote for women.

Ironically, because Chinese immigrants were not considered citizens, ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920 did not give Mabel the right to vote. She was not able to vote until 1943, following the repeal of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act.

**Rose Schneiderman (1882-1972)**

**Labor Organizer and Suffragette**



Rose went to work at age 13 and by age 21 was organizing labor unions. By 1906, she was organizing full-time. Rose used her considerable skills to advocate for women’s suffrage. She spoke

about labor issues with Eleanor Roosevelt and was appointed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to the National Labor Advisory Board, where she fought to include domestic workers in the new Social Security system and argued for equal wages for female workers. Her obituary in *The New York Times* declared that she had done “more to upgrade the dignity and living standards of working women than any other American.”

**Julia Richman (1855-1912)**

**Educator**



Julia was an important educator and social reformer. She believed the new immigrants to New York should shed their old ways, learn English and that their children should be educated

as “Americans.” Julia developed a program to accomplish this, part of which was to forbid the children from speaking their native language. In 1903, she was named district superintendent of the Lower East Side schools. She was the first woman and first Jew in the post. She used her position to create playgrounds, improve school lunches, and enforce health examinations.

## Women's Balcony center

### Sydney Taylor (1904-1978) Writer



Sydney grew up on the Lower East Side. As a young aspiring actor and dancer she changed her name from Sarah to Sydney. When her daughter was born, Sydney told her stories from her childhood. The tales of Ella, Henrietta, Sarah, Charlotte, and Gertrude—the actual names of her sisters—became the first *All-of-a-Kind-Family* book. This was the first book from a major publisher to feature Jewish children, introducing American readers to Judaism and contributing to public understanding and acceptance.

### Louise Nevelson (1905-1988) Sculptor



Louise always knew she was an artist. “My theory is that when we come to this earth, many of us are ready-made...I claim for myself. I was born this way. From earliest, earliest childhood I knew I was going to be an artist. I felt like an artist...I knew exactly what I demanded of this world. Now some people might not demand of life as much as I did. I wanted the whole show. For me, that is living...I got what I wanted—on my terms, on earth. ...and it did take courage, and it did take despair. And the hardship gave me total freedom.”

### Anzia Yeziarska (1880-1970) Writer



Anzia worked factory and menial jobs but always aspired to the life of a writer, an artist. She was sponsored to attend Columbia's Teachers College but never liked teaching. It was through the support of her friends, Rose Pastor Stokes and John Dewey, that she began to have some success as a writer. In some sense Dewey was her muse; he highlighted and gave her a new perspective on her life as an outsider in America. Her books were popular in her day because of their passion and insight into an immigrant woman's experiences.

### Helen Tamiris (1902-1966) Dancer



Helen grew up on the Lower East Side. She studied modern dance at the Henry Street Settlement. As a choreographer she earned praise for *Prize Fight Studies* and *Negro Spirituals* (dances that touched on themes of violence and racism). Helen used her art to address social issues that are still hard for Americans to confront: racism, poverty, and war.



## Women's Balcony left

### Stiff Rivka (Active early 1900s) Soundrel



Stiff was a petty criminal and pickpocket. She was part of a larger Jewish culture of gangs that flourished at the turn of the century on the Lower East Side. We know a little about her because Abe Schoenfeld, hired to infiltrate and report on these gangs, mentions her in his reports. He relates how she was knowledgeable about her religion and while attending shul could easily spot an unsuspecting congregant and pick her pocket.

*Location grounds a story. Neighborhood sets a scene.  
The unintended consequences of this crazy 19th-century  
Lower East Side neighborhood mix of cultures and  
languages and poverty and reinvention was that the  
alchemy of place and the people who experienced it let  
loose new American ideas about education, equality, and  
justice. Here a woman could step into a larger role for  
herself and the people around her, and she did not  
ask permission to do it.*



For this show I was inspired by my first visit to Eldridge Street Synagogue in the 1990s. It was glorious, even with the ceiling falling in, the dirt and broken windows. It was haunted, I was sure. Walking the streets surrounding the Museum at Eldridge Street it was easy to connect with the past and from there to imagine the “Woman’s Gallery” of the Lower East Side and the ghosts of these women who are still with us through the legacy of their passionate, dedicated lives.

I am always curious about how someone experiences a “sense of place.” The landscapes, cityscapes, and nature we live in every day are full of meaning and emotion, as well as the practical realities of our lives. I like to explore a place from the aspect of an emotional memory or poetry or myths or nature, and in my work I hope to reveal a new perspective on the familiar.

*Adrienne Ottenberg*

**Adrienne Ottenberg** lives and works in New York City. Her work combines traditional drawing and painting with digital media. After many years doing editorial and book illustration, she found herself creating maps, and subsequently earned an MA in geography at CUNY to learn computer mapping. She has illustrated more than a dozen books, created frontispiece maps, endpapers maps, and illustrated maps for gallery shows. She is inspired by historical maps and how we each create and bring meaning to the map of our own lives. This is her first solo show.



*Thank you so much* for coming to the show. I hope you felt a connection to these women.

I would love to hear any comments, thoughts, or take-aways you have. Who was familiar and who was new? Please go to the contact page on [adrienneottenberg.com](http://adrienneottenberg.com) and let me know.

Prints will soon be available there as well, while limited edition banners and the map are available at [OurPoetryOfPlace.com](http://OurPoetryOfPlace.com) 

### **About the Museum at Eldridge Street**

The Museum at Eldridge Street is housed in the Eldridge Street Synagogue, a magnificent National Historic Landmark that has been meticulously restored. Opened in 1887, the synagogue is the first great house of worship built in the United States by Eastern European Jewish immigrants. Today, it is the only remaining marker of the great wave of Jewish migration to the Lower East Side that is open to a broad public who wishes to visit Jewish New York. Exhibits, tours, public programs, and education tell the story of Jewish immigrant life, explore architecture and historic preservation, inspire reflection on cultural continuity, and foster collaboration and exchange between people of all faiths, heritages, and interests.

### **Acknowledgments**

Our thanks to artist Adrienne Ottenberg, a longtime friend of the Museum at Eldridge Street. She would like to thank Nancy Johnson, Bonnie Dimun, Jane Curley, Suan Hunter, Mike Shur, Annie Wenner, Robert Hartman, Louisa Thompson, Eve M. Kahn, and Nancy Beiles, and especially her sister Elise Ottenberg.

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### **Audio Guide**

This exhibition is accompanied by an audio guide in which twenty-nine contemporary people—Museum at Eldridge Street docents, staff, and colleagues, the artist herself, and two descendants of the historic women—speak the parts of those portrayed. Download the Bloomberg Connects app by scanning the QR code below to access the guide.



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