

## Mayors, *Machers*, Mavens & Mommas

### Tour of “Jew York” Municipal Archives

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On Mon. Dec. 10<sup>th</sup>, America was rediscovered. NYMA members got a glimpse of the New World at “Celebrating 359 Years: Historical Moments in the NYC Jewish Experience: An Exhibit from the Collections of the New York City Municipal Archives.” This private, in-depth tour, arranged by president **Tina Weiss**, kicked off NYMA’s 2013-2014 academic year.

The library, located at the Surrogate’s Courthouse of City Hall — a magnificent Beau-Arts edifice — in Lower Manhattan, is a depository for all City agencies, with collections going back to the days when New York City was still New Amsterdam.



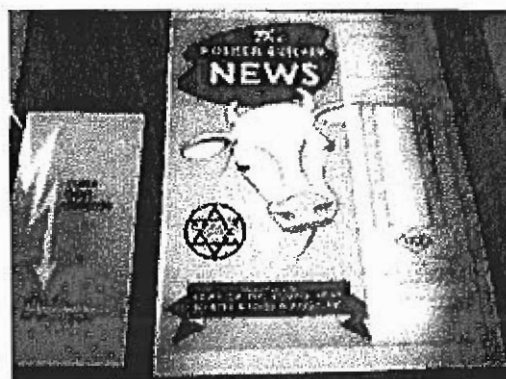
“The Dutch records are on microfilm,” Marcia Kirk – Director, Municipal Archives — explained. Somewhere there is an angry letter from Governor Peter Stuyvesant about the small group of Marranos who arrived in 1654.

While digitization is currently under way, much of the collection remains analog. Civil service exams, mayoral papers, marriage licenses — over 1.8 million vital records as of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century — occupy 221,000 cubic feet.

“These are biographical files.” Ms. Kirk steered us toward a cabinet which served as a sort of vertical file. Notebooks crammed with names of public and prominent individuals — Who’s Who of “Jew” York — graced every shelf, bookcase, and display case, along with correspondence, minutes

of community boards, and, of course, books, lots of books on anything related to the Big Apple.

Ms. Kirk pointed to one area: property cards. “These are used heavily by lawyers even for current cases, as well as researchers, genealogical searches, and probate specialists.”



The exhibit occupied three rooms of the NYC Department of Records. Over 200 items highlighted the immensely diverse social strata of New York Jewry. In one case lay a 1942 copy of *Kosher Butcher News*; in another a 1936 condemnatory letter to Mayor LaGuardia for attacking Hitler’s anti-Semitic policies. The WPA got due space, with photos of elderly *shtetl* immigrants. There were also filmed interviews with Jerry Siegel — one of the inventors of Superman — and music by Leonard Bernstein.

But for NYMA, public display was only the beginning. We were led downstairs to an exclusive, insider view of the Conservation Unit, where a crew of about five displayed some of their projects. Two people were assigned a particular project — one who was grant-based and worked on projects, the other a staff member.

We pored over a spread of old maps. “This is the 1925 Land Book of the Borough of Manhattan,” one of the staff people explained. The pages were encapsulated in Mylar.

But who would have imagined that conservators  
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conservators also play forensic detectives? As hinted in some of the remnants, the Big Apple, though hardly the murder capital of the world that people believe, has earned a rightful spot in film noir for a somewhat sordid character.

The staff member pointed to what appeared to be a huge collection of indictments. "The Queens DA sent us evidence. We created boxes, like address books." As an added yuck factor, one of the members held up a human blood sample.

But there were pleasanter items. Around us were original signs and drawings for Central Park – approximately 130 of them, from private collections. Many, covered in mold and dirt, were lovingly being cleaned. Paper loss was treated with Japanese tissue paper; the rest was being carefully salvaged and separated.

"About 3000 drawings have been scanned and up on the website," the member explained. "We're gearing everything to online digital scanning."

We entered the main foyer, catching sight of the podium where speeches of mayors past and present attracted reporters and officials from all over the world, New and Old. The Municipal Archives exhibit offered a true microcosm of Jewish history – rabbis, businessmen, celebrities, and Yiddishe mommas – who made their host city truly great and unique.

The City Hall Library can be accessed at the following website: <http://www.nyc.gov/html/records/html/chlibrary.shtml>.



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