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Immigrant Song

Lower East Side Oral Histories.

Interviews by Nina Howes, edited by Eric Ferrara. 155 pp., \$17.99. The History Press, 645 Meeting Street, Suite 200, Charleston, SC 29403. historypress.net

By *Linda Lerner*

"We never knew we were poor," says Gladys Choma, words echoed by the twenty-five individuals Nina Howes interviewed from 2001–2012. Wealth was not calculated in monetary terms but in the sense of community, of camaraderie that existed among Poles, Jews, Ukrainians, Hungarians, Puerto Ricans—people of every nationality—who watched out for each other. It was the late 40's and 50's, a life of railroad apartments, with the tub in the kitchen and the john down the hall; life was hard. People went to the baths to wash up. John Milisenda said, "We had an icebox because I remember the man screaming out, 'Yo, Ice' when I was a kid on 252 Houston Street." Along with ice, coal was delivered to heat stoves. Food was bought from push-carts and wrapped in newspapers. There were no bags.

It was post war America and there was rationing. . . . "Everybody would ask each other if you had an extra this or that," Joe Preston said. "Oh, you don't have enough to eat? Come to my house, we have plenty." When electricity replaced gaslight in the 50's "every year about the same time, the lights were shut off—at least for about ten minutes—to commemorate the life of Thomas Edison," said Rabbi Harold Swiss. But not everyone plugged in the fridge. Ice was cheaper.

During the summer people slept on fire escapes and roofs to keep cool; they were always outside sitting on the stoops. Nobody locked doors. People were friendly. Nilda Rivera described herself as having "a rough life, but I've had a magical life too."

These interviews were conducted in various places: coffee shops, a tea parlor, senior center, a pastry shop, theater, wherever it was convenient. Most are just ordinary people trying to survive. "If you had a good job, it was a big deal," recalls James Galuppo.

There are a few references to familiar names like Ethel Rosenberg or Bernard Schwartz, who became Tony Curtis. Joyce Kanowitz speaks of Joseph Papp, who sold rags, and recalls him saying, "I have this great dream. I want to bring Shakespeare to the people." She suggested a park off Grand Street, by the river, which was like an amphitheater, and that is where he had his first performance.

Another is Rebecca Lepkoff, a former dancer and photographer, born on Hester Street in 1916, whose photographs have recently been seen at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, where

her interview took place. She became involved with the photo league, which introduced a new way of seeing. When the organization was closed on suspicion of being a communist front, she began working out of her apartment, using an extra room as a dark room and printing at night. It wasn't easy. She had three children, and often would print through the night in some room where she could pull the shades down. "I managed. . . if you have a passion. . .you'll do it. It's your passion that will create very good work."

And it's that passion which drove Nina Howes to conduct these interviews, not give up until she got them compiled and published; it's that same passion to preserve a way of life before it fades from memory that Eric Ferrara, founder and director of the Lower East Side Project, also feels, and why their partnership resulted in this beautifully produced book.

Its black and white photos add a visual dimension to the oral one; the vibrant voices of people from another time will speak to you, and draw you in as you proceed from one interview to the next. It will linger long after you have put this book down.