

# Exploring History

Jewish New York, Lower Manhattan



# Exploring History

Jewish New York, Lower Manhattan

through the collections at the  
CENTER FOR JEWISH HISTORY

An initiative of jMUSE, **The Jewish Museums Project** is a web publication that explores how archives, libraries, and museums use their unique strengths and collections to spotlight Jewish history and culture, combat antisemitism, and create lasting change.

The Jewish Museums Project experiments with new ways to present important ideas and innovative content; supports the dissemination of knowledge; and works to ensure that Jewish museums and Holocaust museums can serve as the backbone of Jewish cultural engagement in communities around the world.

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Cover image, Lower Manhattan Historical Association

## Exploring History in Lower Manhattan

With over a million adherents living across the five boroughs, New York City has one of the largest Jewish populations in the world. In fact, the fortunes of the city have long been intertwined with the history of Jewish settlement. From the earliest arrivals to Dutch New Amsterdam, to refugees seeking sanctuary in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Jewish communities have left indelible marks on the cultural landscape of New York.

The locations on this self-guided tour speak to these varied experiences of Jewish people who have called New York home. To enrich your journey through the hustle and bustle of Lower Manhattan, each location has been paired with an archival document held at the Center for Jewish History (CJH), the final stop on your journey.

In an ecosystem flooded with misinformation, institutions like CJH preserve the historical record, and offer invaluable opportunities to consult primary sources and first-hand perspectives.

Whether via an immigration document stamped by a faceless bureaucrat, or a familiar sonnet handwritten in the poet's cursive script, archival materials can inspire a more intimate connection with history, and with the ordinary people who helped to shape 21st-century New York.

Schedule an in-person research visit at the Lillian Goldman Reading Room to view these materials at CJH, or else explore its vast collection of archival documents, printed books, photographs, artworks, and artifacts.



## **American Jewish Tercentenary Historical Marker** Peter Minuit Plaza, The Battery

In 1654, Asser Levy and a group of 23 Sephardic Jews fled Brazil in an attempt to find refuge from the Inquisition. Levy arrived in New Amsterdam, the Dutch settlement later renamed New York. He became the colony's first Jewish citizen and eventually prospered as a butcher and merchant. He would also spend the next three decades petitioning the government, tackling antisemitic prejudice, and leading the nascent struggle for Jewish political and civic rights.

The American Jewish Tercentenary Marker was unveiled in 1955 and commemorates the anniversary of Levy's arrival. It is situated in Peter Minuit Plaza, opposite the terminal for the Staten Island Ferry. It includes a flagpole, a pedestal and a decorative bronze tablet fashioned by Abram Belskie, a British-born sculptor who emigrated to New York in the early 20th century. Start your journey here, near the place the earliest Jewish settlers likely landed in New York, and in the neighbourhood where Asser Levy once lived and flourished.



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## COLLECTION SPOTLIGHT

### American Jewish Tercentenary Historical Marker Peter Minuit Plaza, The Battery

Asser Levy was the first Jewish person to own property in North America but, upon his death, there was a legal dispute over Levy's sizable estate. The American Jewish Historical Society holds documents filed by his widow and administrator, Miriam Levy.

### Estate of Asser Levy papers / P-639

I know all Men by these p<sup>re</sup>sent<sup>s</sup> that *Isaac Young* Late of  
of the City of New York within the Jurisdiction of his Royal Highness James Duke of York and Albany  
do hereby certify that for and in consideration of the sum of Sixteen hundred and fifty five pounds ten shillings  
paid for the Conveyance & delivery hereof by *Isaac Young* of the City of New York the Receipt whereof I do hereby  
acknowledge. And do hereby certify that the said *Isaac Young* his Heirs Executors Administrators of every part and  
parcel thereof for ever by these presents given granted bargained sold aliened assigned confirmed and by these  
p<sup>re</sup>sent<sup>s</sup> given granted bargained sold aliened assigned confirmed and confirmed unto the aforementioned *Isaac Young* Heirs  
Executors Administrators one parcel or lot of ground and one Messuage or tenement situate standing lying &  
being with the said City lately purchased by the said *Isaac Young* of *Isaac van Vorst* (alias *Isaac*  
& *Isaac* Smith Relations being had in the due consideration of the said being hereunto entered bearing date the 29<sup>th</sup> of June  
Anno Domini 1675. appertaining together with all and singular the Appurtenances and Improvements what  
soever thereunto in any Manner of way belong or appertaineth to the said *Isaac Young* his Heirs Executors and  
of *Isaac Young* his Heirs Executors Administrators for ever TO HAVE AND TO HOLD and quietly & peaceably  
to enjoy free and clear of and from any Burden Mortgage Incumbrance or Execution or Incumbrances what  
soever other debt or thing by me committed or done Or any person or persons claiming by from or under me. And the  
said *Isaac Young* do by these presents covenant promise and with a firm conscience *Isaac Young* at his proper  
Costs and Charges in the Law any other or further debt or other thing or things Debt or Debts by it by  
Deed or otherwise at any time or times hereafter to be a true assurance of *Isaac Young* his Heirs Executors  
thereunto Required as he shall be reasonably advised In witness whereof I have hereunto set  
my hand and seal. Dated this 5<sup>th</sup> day of September Anno Domini 1675 the first and last hundred  
thirty seven. And in the seventh year of our Sovereign Lord Charles  
the Second by the grace of God of England Scotland France and Ireland King Defender of our Faith &c.

Sealed and Delivered  
In my presence of  
*Samuel de Hartog*  
Joseph de Hartog  
Wm. U. K.

*Isaac Young*

## Statue of Liberty

Liberty Island, New York Harbor

*"Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free"*

You might recognize these words, perhaps the most evocative lines of American poetry committed to page. They were written by Emma Lazarus, a Jewish poet who advocated for refugees displaced by Russian pogroms in the early 1880s. Her work is engraved inside the Statue of Liberty, a welcoming beacon to generations of immigrants who have arrived in the United States through New York. The colossal statue was gifted to the United States by the people of France, and it is revered around the world as a symbol of freedom and democracy.

While it is possible to visit the Statue of Liberty Museum and the Ellis Island National Museum of Immigration on a ticketed tour, you might instead take a free round-trip on the Staten Island Ferry. Remember to stand on the starboard-side on the outward journey (and port-side on the way back), for breathtaking views of both the Statue of Liberty and Lower Manhattan.





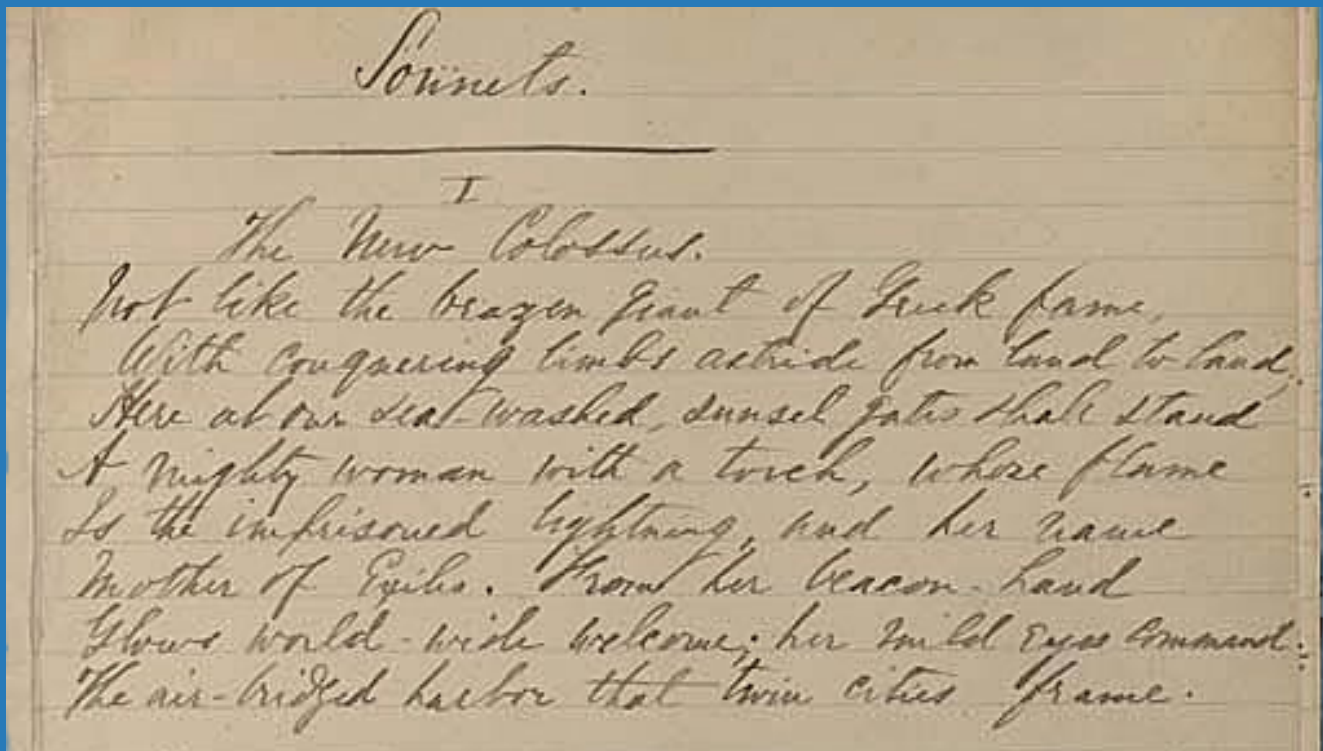
## COLLECTION SPOTLIGHT

Statue of Liberty

Liberty Island, New York Harbor

The American Jewish Historical Society holds a manuscript notebook that belonged to Emma Lazarus. The notebook includes a handwritten version of "The New Colossus," the poem engraved on a plaque inside the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty.

**Manuscript notebook from the Emma Lazarus collection,  
1877-1887 / P-2**



## **Museum at Eldridge Street**

12 Eldridge Street, Lower East Side

As Eastern European refugees arrived in New York amidst the pogroms of the 1880s, these emergent Jewish communities built synagogues to assemble and worship. One of the first purpose-built spaces was erected on Eldridge Street in 1887, and this Moorish-Revival building survives today as both a functioning synagogue and a museum. The museum is open for both self-guided and docent-led tours, as well as exhibitions and events.

Every summer, the museum also hosts the Egg Rolls, Egg Creams and Empanadas Festival. The festival encourages collaboration and exchange between people of different backgrounds, and celebrates the cultural diversity of the Lower East Side and Chinatown. Visitors might enjoy Chinese opera, klezmer performances from Eastern Europe, and plena music from Puerto Rico, all on the same neighbourhood block.

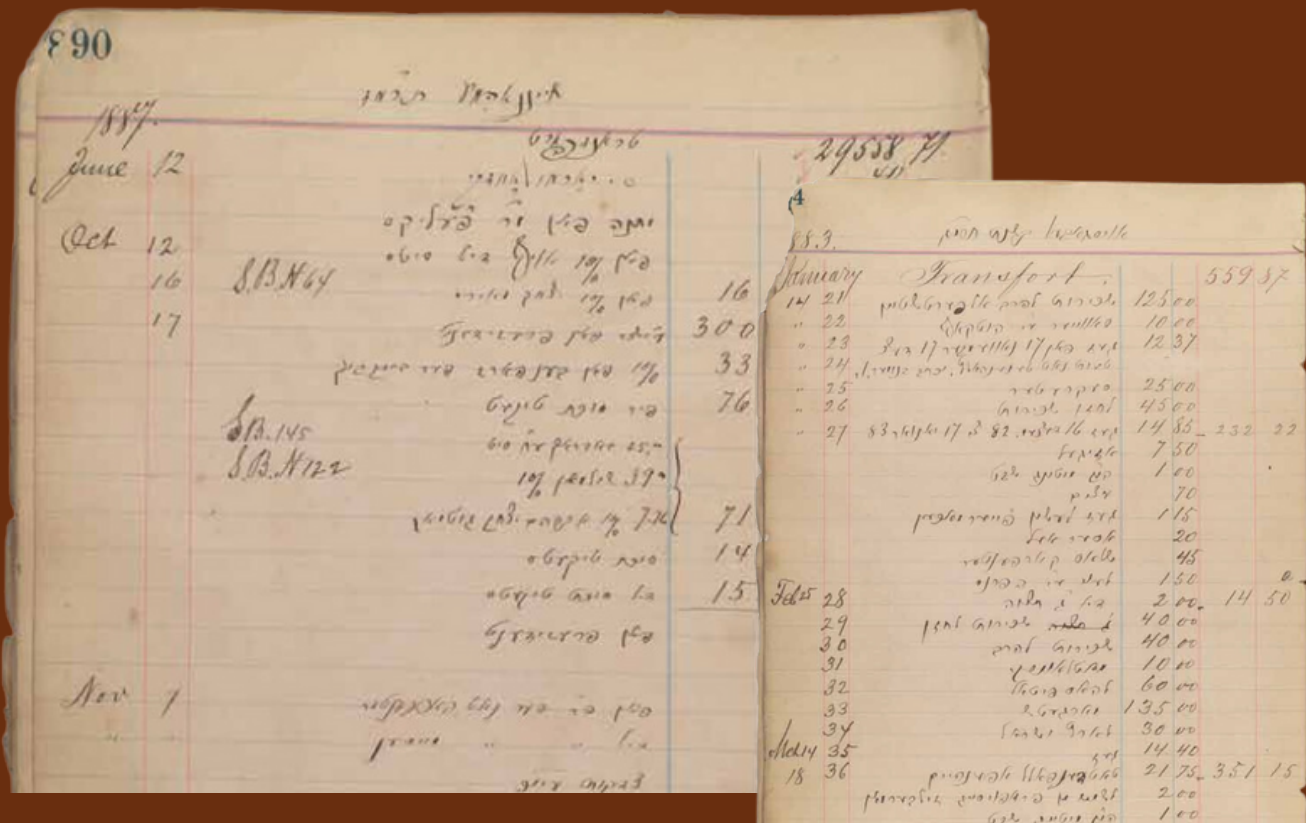


# COLLECTION SPOTLIGHT

Museum at Eldridge Street  
 12 Eldridge Street, Lower East Side

The American Jewish Historical Society holds an account book that details the minute expenses involved in building the Eldridge Street Synagogue, from buying the plot of land, to moving the Torah ark from the congregation's former home on Allen Street.

**Congregation Kahal Adath Yeshurun with Anshe Lubitz [Eldridge Street Synagogue] (New York) Records / I-10**



## **The Forward Building**

175 East Broadway, Lower East Side

The Yiddish-language newspaper The Forward was co-founded by Abraham Cahan, a Lithuanian-born socialist who had fled to New York in the 1880s. Cahan served as editor-in-chief for four decades, during which time the newspaper became one of the most influential Jewish publications in the United States, and a leading progressive voice in American politics.

In 1912, with circulation at 125,000, The Forward built a ten-story building at 175 Broadway. The Beaux Arts masterpiece was amongst the first skyscrapers on the Lower East Side and served as an effective symbol of the power and popularity of socialism in early-20th-century New York. While The Forward still exists today as an online-only publication, the offices at 175 Broadway were converted into condominiums in the 1990s. From street level, look for the bas relief portraits of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, a subtle hint to the building's history as an important center for radical political thought.

FORWARD BUILDING



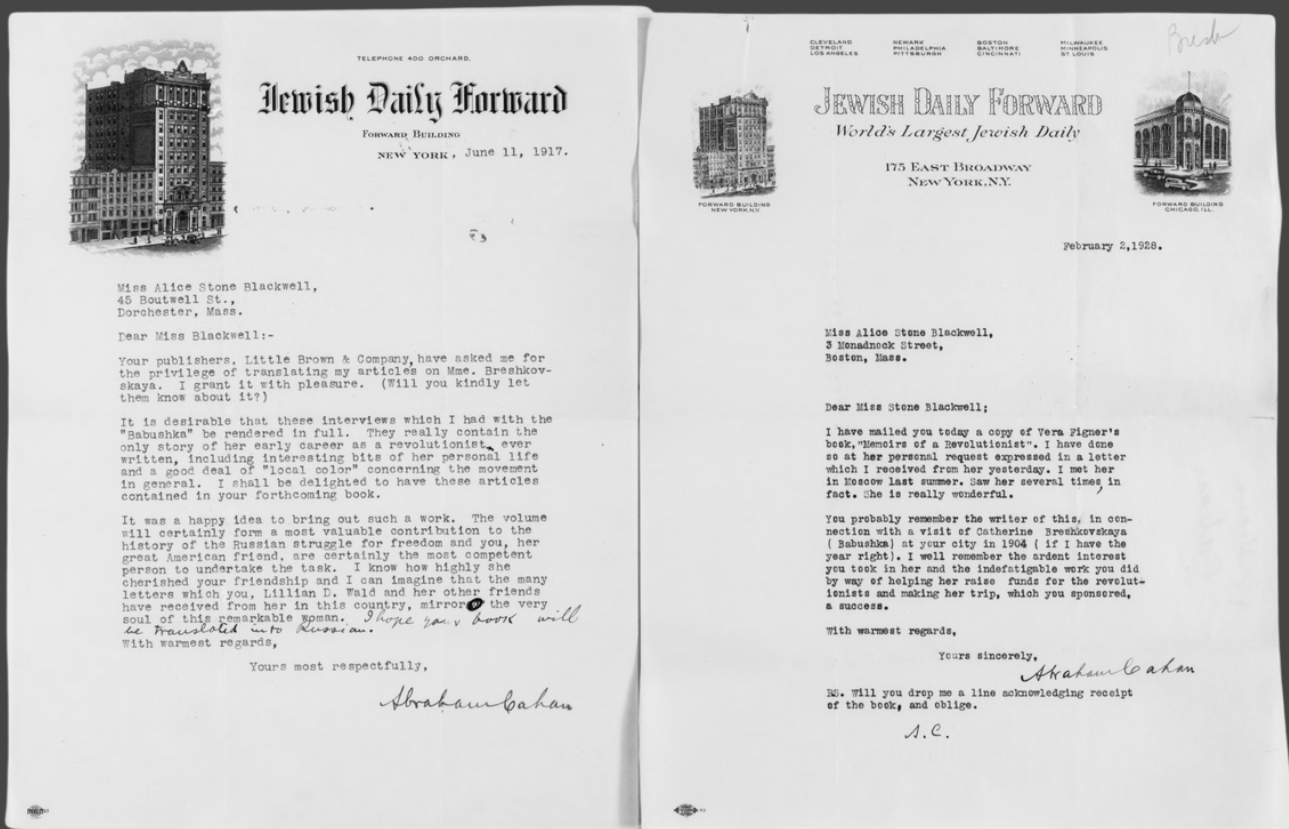
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# COLLECTION SPOTLIGHT

The Forward Building  
175 East Broadway, Lower East Side

The YIVO Institute for Jewish Research holds Abraham Cahan's personal archive, which includes manuscript material for The Forward, as well as correspondence with many significant political and literary figures of the 20th century.

## Papers of Abraham Cahan / RG 1139





## Tenement Museum

103 Orchard Street, Lower East Side

At the turn of the 20th century, the Lower East Side was a crowded district of tenements and factories, inhabited by an ever-increasing population of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. However, walking along any street in this foreign land, a migrant would find comfort in the familiar: a synagogue opposite a Jewish-run social club or mutual-aid society, a kosher delicatessen next to an Ashkenazi-run appetizing store.

The Tenement Museum provides a unique and unforgettable experience, as it recreates this strange and yet familiar world, with immersive storytelling focused on the people and communities of the Lower East Side. Set in two former tenement buildings, many of the museum's regular tours are centered on real Jewish families who lived and worked in the neighborhood. Be sure to book in advance, as the tours regularly sell out.



## COLLECTION SPOTLIGHT

Tenement Museum

103 Orchard Street, Lower East Side

TJ.B. Lightman was a student who led a project that documented Jewish life in New York, with a particular interest in the tenements of the Lower East Side. The American Jewish Historical Society holds over 300 photographs taken as part of the project.

**Graduate School for Jewish Social Work (New York)  
Records / I-7**



## **The Angel Orensanz Foundation Center**

172 Norfolk Street, Lower East Side

A generation before the arrival of Eastern European immigrants, German-Jewish workers and intellectuals gravitated towards the Lower East Side, and established theaters, cafes, and places of worship. In 1849, Congregation Anshe Chesed built a distinctive redbrick synagogue as a hub for Reform Judaism, a movement intended to make religion simpler and more relevant to everyday life. It now remains the oldest standing synagogue in New York.

The Spanish artist Angel Orensanz bought the abandoned building in the mid-1980s and converted it into an art gallery. It operates today as The Angel Orensanz Foundation Center and opens regularly for exhibitions, events, and performances. It also functions occasionally as a synagogue. Check online for scheduled events, or else simply stroll along Norfolk Street and admire its idiosyncratic Gothic Revival architecture from street level.



## COLLECTION SPOTLIGHT

The Angel Orensanz Foundation Center  
172 Norfolk Street, Lower East Side

The American Jewish Historical Society holds a collection of photographs and newspaper clippings related to synagogues on the Lower East Side, with a focus on the controversial and eventually aborted sale of the Stanton Street Shul in 2001.

**Lower East Side Synagogues Collection / I-603**









## COLLECTION SPOTLIGHT

Union Square Park  
Union Square, Manhattan

The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) was initially spearheaded by Yiddish-speaking anarchists like Emma Goldman. The YIVO Institute for Jewish Research holds this informative booklet, produced to help workers run a successful union meeting.

**Records of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union / 000002461**



## **The Triangle Fire Memorial**

23 Washington Place, Greenwich Village

The Brown Building (formerly the Asch Building) stands on the corner of Washington Place and Greene Street, a block east of Washington Square Park. Now owned by New York University, the building was the site of one of the deadliest industrial disasters in the history of the United States. On March 25, 1911, 146 garment workers died in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, a tragedy caused by criminal negligence, unsafe working conditions and exploitative labor practices. The majority of those who died were young women, Jewish and Italian immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe.

In fall 2023, after decades of planning, a new memorial was unveiled at the site, a stainless-steel ribbon that falls along the edge of the Brown Building. The names of the 146 workers are inscribed at the end of the ribbon, visible from the sidewalk and laser-cut to allow light to pass through. The memorial marks the conclusion of a long and difficult process to honor the people who died, and to reckon with the causes of the tragedy.



TRIANGLE  
WAIST  
COMPANY  
MEYERS  
CROWN  
&  
WALLACH  
"HIGH STANDARD"  
CLOTHING

MAURICE  
BLUM  
CLOTHING  
SPECIALTIES

23-29  
HARRIS  
BROS.  
MFRS. OF  
MEN'S  
CLOTHING

BERNSTEIN  
& MEYERS  
CLOAKS  
AND  
SUITS

23-29 THE HATTERS' FUR EXCHANGE 23-29

23-29

THE HATTERS' FUR EXCHANGE

## COLLECTION SPOTLIGHT

### The Triangle Fire Memorial

23 Washington Place, Greenwich Village

The YIVO Institute for Jewish Research also holds an ILGWU collection, with documents that relate to the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire. These records include photographs and clippings, as well as speeches inspired by the tragedy.

### Records of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union / I-309



## **Yiddish Theater District**

### **Second Avenue, East Village**

In the early decades of the 20th century, New York became a vital center for Yiddish theater. Audiences experienced everything from Shakespearean tragedy to vaudeville and burlesque, all filtered through Jewish immigrant perspectives and the Yiddish language. From Houston to 14th Street, Second Avenue was lined with impressive theaters, where Jewish communities revived the traditions of their homelands and interrogated how these rituals and customs might translate into life in the United States.

After the decline in Yiddish theater post-war, some of the most impressive venues were repurposed, or else demolished. However, traces of the once-vibrant scene remain. On the corner of 12th Street, look for the distinctive Moorish-Revival façade of Village East (formerly the Yiddish Art Theater), a multiplex cinema originally built as a Yiddish playhouse. Watch a film, or simply stroll into the lobby, to appreciate the carefully restored interior.

THE GREATEST YIDDISH PICTURE EVER MADE

MAYMON FILMS INC. PRESENTS

# MAURICE SCHWARTZ

in SHOLEM ALEICHEM'S CLASSIC

# TEVYA

DIRECTION: MAURICE SCHWARTZ

PRODUCED BY HENRY ZISKIN

MUSIC: SHOLEM SECUNDA



# מאריס שווארץ

איז דעם גרעסטען אידישען פילם זאלן ערליכט'ס בארימטע ווערק

## COLLECTION SPOTLIGHT

Yiddish Theater District  
Second Avenue, East Village

The Yiddish Art Theater was founded in 1918 by the actor, producer, and director Maurice Schwartz. The YIVO Institute for Jewish Research holds an archive of Schwartz's papers, with playbills, sheet music, and annotated scripts for many plays performed at the theater.

Papers of Maurice Schwartz / RG 498



## **Center for Jewish History**

15 W 16th Street, Union Square

Once the exclusive realm of scholars, research libraries are now attempting to make their collections more accessible to the public. The Center for Jewish History (CJH) hosts five partner institutions: American Jewish Historical Society, American Sephardi Federation, Leo Baeck Institute New York, Yeshiva University Museum, and YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. While you can visit exhibitions held at CJH, and access selected materials online, it is worth booking a research visit to engage with the collections on a more intimate level.

The Lillian Goldman Reading Room is open to visitors of all backgrounds each day. It is strongly recommended that you create a research account and make a reservation to explore the collections in advance. As with the majority of archives and research libraries across the United States, it is expected that you keep your phone on silent, that you treat materials with care and respect, and that you follow instructions given by reference librarians. It may be requested that you use white cotton gloves, page turners, and book cradles when handling particularly rare or delicate items.



## COLLECTION SPOTLIGHT

Center for Jewish History  
15 W 16th Street, Union Square

The collections at CJH span five thousand years of Jewish history. They include more than 5 miles of archival documents in dozens of languages, alongside half a million printed volumes and thousands of artworks, textiles, ritual objects, recordings, films, and photographs. Refer to CJH's website for research guides and databases, as well as a user-friendly search engine that unifies collections held across the five partner institutions:

**Explore the collections here or visit [CJH.org](http://CJH.org).**

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