



Landmark of the Spirit: The Eldridge Street Synagogue

Annie Polland

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New York City's magnificent Eldridge Street Synagogue was built in 1887 in response to the great wave of Jewish immigrants who fled persecution in eastern Europe. Finding their way to the Lower East Side, the new arrivals formed a vibrant Jewish community that flourished from the 1850s until the 1940s. Their synagogue served not only as a place of worship but also as a singularly important center in the development of American Judaism.

A near ruin in the 1980s that was recently reopened after a massive twenty-year restoration, the Eldridge Street Synagogue has been named a National Historic Landmark. But as Bill Moyers tells us in his foreword, the synagogue is also “a landmark of the spirit, . . . the spirit of a new nation committed to the old idea of liberty.”

Annie Polland uses elements of the building's architecture—the façade, the benches, the grooves worn into the sanctuary floor—as points of departure to discuss themes, people, and trends at various moments in the synagogue's history, particularly during its heyday from 1887 until the 1930s. Exploring the synagogue's rich archives, the author shines new light on the religious life of immigrant Jews, introduces various rabbis, cantors and congregants, and analyzes the significance of this special building in the context of the larger American-Jewish experience.

For more information, go to: www.EldridgeStreet.org

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