

The Kling and Niman Family Visitor Center Opens at the Lower East Side Jewish Conservancy

by Michael Pertain

The morning of Friday, May 6, 2011 was beautiful on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The sun was shining, the weather perfect. A crowd was beginning to gather in front of 400 Grand Street at around 10:30 for the opening of the Lower East Side Jewish Conservancy (LESJC) Kling and Niman Family Visitor Center.

The Klings and the Nimans are two interrelated branches of my family on my mother's side. They lived in the Kaunas Guberniya in what is today Lithuania, specifically in the area around Vabalninkas, Kupiskis and Anyksčiai. Our ancestors included such luminaries as the *Ari* (Rabbi Isaac Luria) and the *Lyush* (Rabbi Mordecai Jaffe). I have been researching my family tree since 1998 and have been disseminating fascinating discoveries about remarkable ancestors to the family members with whom I have come in contact with throughout the years since I began. Like other families

of our ethnicity, Klings and Nimans can be found on virtually every continent (except Antarctica), creating and achieving in many fields of endeavor.

The opening of the Kling and Niman Family Visitor Center was the culmination of almost a year of planning and renovating. The ground floor store front, that was for 25 years the home of Ruby Fruits, was about to open as the public face of the Lower East Side Jewish Conservancy, an organization dedicated to preserving the heritage of the Jewish immigration experience of the early twentieth century, and supporting present day Jewish continuity in the neighborhood.

On that May 6 morning, members of the family that owned Ruby Fruits mingled with former customers, neighborhood folks, administrators, board members and licensed tour guides of the LESJC, local civic and government representatives and members of the Kling and Niman family.

The LESJC building, a four floor brick structure, stands between a parking lot and another similarly unassuming brick building. The front is all glass, sporting a bright two tone green striped awning, reminiscent of the time and place it hopes to evoke. The name of the center, *THE LOWER EAST SIDE JEWISH CONSERVANCY KLING AND NIMAN FAMILY VISITOR CENTER*, is written in English across the stripes. The translation into Chinese and Spanish will soon adorn the front windows, inviting in the neighbors. A central door welcomes the visitor into the interior space, where the theme continues. Three original benches from the now defunct Beth Hamidrash Hagadol synagogue provide seating and exhibit space. Two old wooden doors have been reconfigured to serve as the reception area, where the visitor can get information and purchase tickets for

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tours and programs. Extra materials are hidden away in compartments designed to resemble the fruit and vegetable bins of the previous tenants.

The essence of the Center is to be found on the walls, where is displayed the history of Jewish life on the Lower East Side and the story of the Kling and Niman family and their dispersion from Eastern Europe to communities around the world, including the Lower East Side. Both narratives are presented with text, maps, photographs and films. I provided the material, the narratives and one of the films for the Kling and Niman part. Robin Esrock, a Kling cousin, provided the second film, and the LESJC provided everything for the exhibit about the Lower East Side.

Sixteen family members attended the opening, two from as far away as St. Louis, Missouri. Many had never met each other. Indeed I had never met some of them before. Speakers included state legislators, city officials, and members of the local community and the LESJC.

How did it come about that a visitor center is exhibiting the story of my family? The simple answer is that I funded the renovation in return for the inclusion of the exhibition about my family. Little did I know at that



Michael Pertain and Hope Niman-Prosky at the opening of the Kling-Niman Family History Center

time just how much more would be involved beyond writing a check.

This leads to the next question, just how did this opportunity come to me? Actually, in a way, I came to it.

Like many of us doing family history, I wondered how I could create out of it something that would be of some *lasting value to someone in future years and do it in a usable format. Who is going to sit and read a database?* I wanted, also, to show my appreciation to my ancestors for struggling so that I could live a comfortable American life. There was something else I wanted to do—that is, to do my part to make the world a better place—but connecting that to the family history only came to me later.

It was while thinking about some possibilities—*maybe a book or a film*—that I received a fundraising letter from the Lower East Side Jewish Conservancy. The letter offered naming rights for a new visitor center they were hoping to open, in return for what seemed a surprisingly small sum. It was an amount even I, a retired school teacher, could possibly



Left to right: Kling Cousins Connie Levy and Carol Levy-Charles who came from St. Louis, Missouri and Lynn Levin who came from Southampton, Pennsylvania.



The opening ceremony at the Kling-Niman Family History Center

afford. In addition, the organization's objective was to conserve Jewish heritage, an obvious attraction for any genealogist. I decided to call. We met, agreed that this would be beneficial for all concerned, and work began.

I visited the Museum of the Chinese in America to get ideas about how the exhibit should be organized, since it was a similarly small space focusing on an ethnic immigrant group. *Why reinvent the wheel?* I then began writing an introduction. This was the point at which I had to seriously think about my purposes and goals. Is this to be a vanity piece? I paid, so I get to tell a parochial story that would probably be of interest only to my family? No, I want to include tourists of all backgrounds, plus the Chinese and Hispanic neighbors who might walk in. What value might this exhibit offer them?

I began to write. I wrote about how the Chinese and Hispanics today on the Lower East Side are also often poor, struggling immigrants, like the Klings and Nimans. They, too, have cousins all over the world. They, too, sometimes lead heroic, impressive lives, despite their challenges. Perhaps our story will make them feel validated and valued, give them hope for their own and their children's futures. Maybe they will be inspired to share *their* story.

Then I chose which family members should be highlighted for the inaugural exhibit and planned a mapping of the family diaspora. Scott Guerin and Jane Dodds were hired by the Conservancy to do all of the space design, renovation, carpentry, furniture making and the visuals. We worked together to plan how much space could be committed for each aspect. A PowerPoint

presentation about a family member, which I created a few years ago, was edited and turned into a film. All this sounds simple enough, but believe me, it wasn't! The original plan was that the Visitor Center would open in early October, 2010. It opened early the following May, and we are still working on improvements.

Future plans include translating all

narratives in the exhibits into at least Chinese Mandarin and Spanish. The translations would be placed on cards in pouches beneath each visual. In addition, I would like the film offerings to be expanded. I just interviewed on video a 99 year old cousin and expect to interview another one who just reached 90 and was born and lived on the Lower East Side. I would like these to be shown on a touch screen on which visitors would be encouraged to respond and also to comment about their own or their family's immigrant experiences. I hope we can hire a genealogist/curator to organize new exhibits and events to make our Visitor Center a really exciting place to be.

The Kling and Niman Family Visitor Center of the Lower East Side Jewish Conservancy is located at 400 Grand Street at Clinton Street. It is open on Sundays from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., on Tuesdays through Thursdays from 12 p.m. to 5 p.m., and closed on Fridays, Saturdays and Mondays. If you would like to come see us or learn more, visit us online at www.nycjewishtours.org or call 212-374-4100, Ext. 1 for hours, directions and information about neighborhood tours and special events.

Michael Pertain has been active in the Jewish Genealogical Society, Inc. since 1999. He was on the Executive Council for several years, serving as Vice President and Secretary, as well as a Council member. He has taught classes on researching family history. An ordained rabbi, Michael has been an educator throughout his life, working for many years in the New York City school system. He is now an adjunct in the Brooklyn College SEEK Program, where he teaches English and counsels students. ✪