

EXPLORING THE CITY

BY JIM MURPHY

National Museum of American Jewish History

*View of a non-Jew**

After watching the National Museum of American Jewish History's glass and terra cotta building rising along 5th Street below Market for what seemed like ages, I was anxious to see what was inside.

And I was not disappointed.

This new 100,000-square-foot museum tells a powerful story about Jews in America.

Even the heavy security in the lobby — like that at an airport — reminds you that Jews were not always welcomed here, and remain “eternally vigilant” even today.

Upon entering: Your small items go into a basket for X-ray inspection and you pass through a metal detector. Even though the pens I had with me were carefully inspected and returned to me, I didn't realize until I entered the exhibit area that I couldn't use them in the museum. Only pencils are permitted, which means that much of this review is from memory.

My editor asked me to review the museum from the point of view of a non-Jew, and I can fulfill only part of that mission. More on that later.

As you enter the exhibit area, you are encouraged to go up to the fourth floor and work down chronologically — from 1654 until today.

The view from the top of the airy 85-foot atrium is impressive, with wood-and-glass stairways dramatically crisscrossing the open area and carrying you to the rest of the museum below.

The exhibits are imaginative, instructive, graphically pleasing and both adult- and child-friendly, with all the bells and whistles of modern interactivity. Only one gripe: the light type on a grey background in some dark areas made copy hard to read with my older eyes.

Some highlights for me: A spinning ceiling globe light recreating the atmosphere of balls held during the Jewish holiday of Purim; an electronic “map table” illustrating how Jews moved westward; the opportunity to explore a covered wagon; a turn-of-the-century tenement apartment; school desks and early 20th-century Jewish education; exhibits depicting the lives of garment workers; and timelines showing what

has happened among Jews in America in context with world events.

The museum presents the differing beliefs of Reform, Conservative and Orthodox sects...and the struggles of Jewish immigrants to pass their religious traditions onto their U.S.-born children.

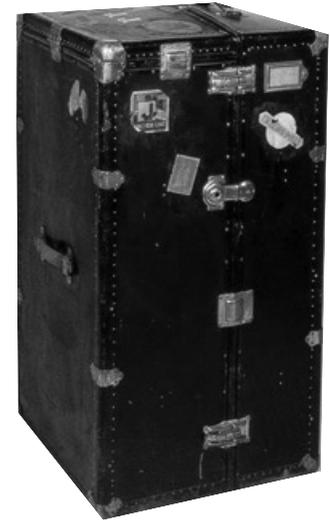
I didn't know: that the first Jews to arrive in the U.S. in 1654 were refugees from Recife in Brazil; that there were sizable Jewish settlements in smaller cities like Charleston and Cincinnati; or that for a short time, Los Angeles had the largest Jewish population in the U.S.

Time your visit: On the March Sunday afternoon I visited, the museum was mobbed, and it was difficult to get close to a number of the displays; also, several guided tours pushed their way through the already clogged rooms, making movement even more difficult; and there was quite a bottleneck on the third floor, where a film about America at war — and the mistreatment of European Jews leading up to the war — attracted a large crowd.

In summary: This is an important museum. In three main floors of exhibit area and a photo gallery/hall of fame, the museum clearly portrays the tremendous impact Jews have had on our lives — from science and entertainment to politics and civil rights protests. You can easily spend several hours here and not see everything.

This museum will interest people of all races and religions, and I highly recommend it.

*Full disclosure: I was asked to review this museum from a non-Jewish perspective, and my background is Irish. But when my twin brother married a Jewish girl, he underwent routine testing to find out if he was a carrier for Tay-Sachs disease — a rare, inherited disorder of the nervous system. About one in every 27 members of the Ashkenazi Jewish population carries the Tay-Sachs gene. Surprisingly to us, he was determined to be a carrier. Upon further testing, we learned my mother and her five children all are Tay-Sachs carriers. So, I'm not Jewish, but I wouldn't be surprised if one of my distant Irish relatives was rather close to a Jewish person at one time. Life is full of unexpected connections.



A trunk from St. Louis



Family photograph of the Horowitzes in Vilna

FAST FACTS

Name:
National Museum of American Jewish History

Location: 101 S. Independence Mall East, Philadelphia, PA 19106. Enter at Market Street.

Phone: 215-923-3811

Open: Tuesday – Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Saturday & Sunday: 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

More info: See website at www.nmajh.org