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NEW YORK'S LOWER EAST SIDE, BEFORE THE HIPSTERS ARRIVED:  
PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE 1970s AND 80s REVEAL A QUIET,  
TIGHT-KNIT IMMIGRANT COMMUNITY OF FANTASTIC CHARACTERS

By Regina Graham, April 19, 2018



© Meryl Meisler / Courtesy of The Storefront Project & Steven Kasher Gallery

The bustling Lower East Side neighborhood in New York is known today as a hotspot for hipsters and for rocketing property prices, but 40 years ago it was quite the opposite and was a quiet tight-knit immigrant community.

Renowned photographer Meryl Meisler took hundreds of captivating photos of the neighborhood during the 1970s and 1980s showcasing the vibrant characters in the area that included children to elderly people at assisted living facilities.

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'The photos of the Lower East Side that I have show that it was a very vital neighborhood and community back then,' Meisler told DailyMail.com.

'It wasn't a place where I knew anyone who lived there at the time, but there were definitely artists who were going down there. But the stores and everything else closed on weekends, it was really quiet. It was not the destination that it is now.'

From the 1940s through the 1970s, the Bowery area was known as New York City's 'Skid Row' and one of the photos Meisler captured shows a man lying on top of Bowery Street's median.

'The Salvation Army had their mission right there and it was a place that was frequented by what people nicknamed "Bowery Bums",' Meisler recalled of how the homeless population were addressed during the time period.

'To my recollection, that image of the man shows a combination of him being "asleep and passed out." Back at that time, Bowery was the "Bowery Bump". That day I was going around with two filmmakers that I met at a disco and they wanted to do a story for Spanish magazine about New York.

'I took them around to different places for them to take photos and we happened upon this man. So I captured an image showing one of the filmmakers taking a closer photo of the man asleep. And I don't think the story ever came about, but I still have these images.'

Meisler, who at the time was aged 24 and was a relative newcomer to the art scene, recalled how there would be street festivals during the summer months in the community where children would play games like the ring toss as families would come together and enjoy the fun.

'At that point I was a CETA artist and it was the perfect opportunity,' she explained. 'This street festival was happening and I went with my dad as three of us CETA photographers had an exhibit at that festival of our photos.'

'The photos weren't that great, but you can see that I was apart of the festival and was photographing the festival.'

Other images of the community show elderly people singing at an assisted living facility, a butcher preparing meat and beautiful blonde haired woman with her arms raised in the air.

That image specifically is a shot that Meisler captured of her mother, who was nicknamed Sunny because of her vibrant personality.

'We were at Sammy's Romanian, a restaurant that serves Romanian style food. There was a piano player and someone singing and people were just rejoicing including my mom,' Meisler recalled.

'We were having a nice day together as mother and daughter.'

Another captivating image shows a man named Morris Katz smoking a cigar while sporting two black eyes that he received after he was robbed.

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'Mr. Katz called me one day and told me on the telephone about what happened and he was upset. I went over to his ground floor apartment, which didn't have window guards, and he told me he had fallen asleep and some youths climbed into his apartment and mugged him,' Meisler shared.

'And you can see in the photo that his eyes are black or blue. I asked him if I could photograph him and he said yes. It was amazing because he smoked this cigar, but he was healthy as a horse until he passed away.'

Meisler noted that he was a popular fixture in the neighborhood at the time and that everyone enjoyed his welcoming spirit.

During their first meeting, he sported plaid pants and a sports jacket with a zebra patterned shirt, a bow tie and a yarmulke while he greeting people and gave people lollipops.

'He was the Mayor of Grand Street and that's how he introduced himself to people,' she added.

A collection of her photographs showing the community 40 years ago are set to go on display next month in celebration of Lower East Side History Month.

The exhibit opens on May 3 at The Storefront Project located at 70 Orchard Street and will run until June 3.

She is also the author of two books, *A Tale of Two Cities: Disco Era Bushwick* and *Purgatory & Paradise: Sassy 70s Suburbia & the City*, which include photos from Fire Island, Studio 54 and the Lower East Side.