ELDRIDGE STREET SYNAGOGUE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Annie Polland

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Annie Polland conducted by Roberta Brandes Gratz on April 19, 2023. This interview is part of the Eldridge Street Synagogue Restoration Archive Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that they are reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. The views expressed in this oral history interview do not necessarily reflect the views of the New York Preservation Archive Project.

Transcriptionist: Audio Transcription Center	Session: 1
Interviewee: Annie Polland	Location: NYC
Interviewer: Roberta Brandes Gratz	Date: April 19, 2023

[Side Conversation]

Q: [00:02:00] My name is Roberta Brandes Gratz. It is April 19, 2023. And I am sitting here with Annie Polland who was an early employee at the Eldridge Street Project. Let me start, Annie, by asking you—tell us a little bit about you before you came to Eldridge and how you came to Eldridge.

Polland: Sure. So let's see, going back. So I guess it—about 25 years ago, in April of 1998, I started working. I was a graduate student at Columbia studying history. And I started working with Big Onion Walking Tours. And so Big Onion Walking Tours did tours all over the city but I started out on the Lower East Side 'cause that was my greatest interest. And the tours that Big Onion gave, like, partnered with Eldridge Street. [00:03:00] So we would bring groups into the synagogue. And at that point, the restoration was not completed. It was kind of very much—

Q: Just starting.

Polland: —just starting. You could go into the sanctuary space. I think we would bring people into the base midrash level and do an introduction and then bring them up into the sanctuary space. And it was really wonderful to be in the space. And I just found it was so easy to teach in

that space because people were so absorbed by it, and they were able to ask questions and you could just really work off of people's questions. And so it was just a very natural place to teach.

Q: What were you studying?

Polland: I was in the history department at Columbia. So I was doing a PhD in American history and Jewish history. So at that point I was finishing my courses and was starting to, study for my oral examinations. And so I did a lot of tours, especially in that year. And then, although actually [00:04:00] I think the very first time I was at Eldridge Street was with Arthur Goren, who was my advisor at Columbia. And he was teaching a class on American Jewish history and brought the students down to the Lower East Side. And I think my parents were visiting at the time so I think my parents were with me.

And it was just so amazing to be in the space because, you know, being up in Morningside Heights, reading all these books about the Lower East Side, and then to just be there and to be in a neighborhood where it was like a stage set for recalling the past because so many of the buildings were still there. And at the same time, what was coursing through the present was, you know, Chinatown. And so much of what was happening in Chinatown was reminiscent of what had happened at the turn of the century on the Lower East side. Less crowded, of course, less dense conditions. But, you know, this idea of people coming to start a new life and being very family focused and, all of that was just kind of part of the environment. So for me, studying, all of this in books or looking at microfilm, it was exciting to come and see it all in 3D. [00:05:00] And I think the other contrast that was so exciting was that Columbia wasn't exactly like the

warmest of places and teaching was very, you know, formal. And so to, you know, be able to have more of a, to adapt and to pursue a more informal teaching style was really almost exhilarating. And, you know, that synagogue provided the framework for it.

Q: Did your family have a Lower East Side connection?

Polland: You know, I didn't know that we did. So at the time, I was just kind of operating, because I'm from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. And—

Q: Oh, right.

Polland: —my assumption was that—and the great grandparents on both sides, of my mother's sides came to Milwaukee around the turn of the twentieth century. You know, came in 1906 around, I think right around that time for both of them. And I guess I had always assumed they went straight to Milwaukee. And I had been giving walking tours for quite a while when I finally like, "Oh, I'll look up my great-grandmother." And when she came in and on the Ellis Island thing, it said that she stopped, [00:06:00] she went to a family named Ostrowski at 32 Canal Street, which is I had been walking by that giving tours all the time. It was right across from the Loew's movie theater on Canal Street. So it was kind of exciting to go in there. And then many years later, I actually went inside of the tenement. So I kind of got to experience what all of our visitors at the Tenement Museum feel. And I'm always, you know, like, "Oh, my grandparents were in this place, or my great-grandparents were in this place."So that was kind of nice. But it wasn't the immediate draw. I mean, the immediate draw was—

Q: And you didn't need it. People would ask me, so they just assumed that I was interested because of forbearers. I said, "Absolutely not. My forbearers were all in Brooklyn." But I felt like they were all there just in the atmosphere of that building—

Polland: Exactly.

Q: —was all our heritage.

Polland: Exactly. And just that, you know, again, that amazing mix of whatever Jewish tradition was with being in America was very much a [00:07:00] part of that. And I feel like, you know, the Eldridge Street Synagogue, the Forward Building, or Malala, like, there were so many buildings that spoke to the diversity of Jewish life that was, you know, so formative and but, you know, we culled dynamics that would be in Brooklyn as well, or in Milwaukee for that matter. But it was, you know, on the Lower East Side, so concentrated.

Q: So you were working with the Big Onion Tour?

Polland: Yes.

Q: And then how did coming work?

Polland: Yes. So I finished my dissertation, or I was in the process of finishing my dissertation. And, you know, I knew neither my husband nor I wanted to leave New York City. And if I went on the academic job market, we would most certainly have to leave New York City. And I just wasn't interested. Like, I didn't wanna be—it just wasn't in me to be a professor, although I admire people who do it. And I see, obviously, a great value in that role. It just, I loved—what was calling me more was the work I was doing on the streets, [laughs] you know? And so, but again, not wanting to leave New York. [00:08:00] And I mean, we were essentially very foolish because we didn't have money, you know, we just had our, you know, I was working, I think I adjuncted. But then a job opened up at Eldridge Street as a director, the Director of Education, and someone sent it to me. And I'm like, "Oh, I'll do—why don't I do this?" And so, 'cause I love teaching at Eldridge Street. And so the job was really about teaching kids, I think, at that point. But I'm like, "Oh, I like kids. I'll do this for a while." But then I think what was nice was being able to take that role and do more with it, and not just kids but to adults—

Q: Do you remember what year that was?

Polland: Yes, that would've been, the spring of 2004.

Q: Okay. And you came on as Director of Education?

Polland: Right.

Q: Who were some of the other staff members at [unclear][00:08:47]?

Polland: So, yeah, it was, well, Amy [E.] Waterman was the director, and Hanna Griff was the program director. Amy Stein Milford was like a kind of communications, I think. And [00:09:00] those were the main. Eva Brune was development. And I think that was the core. Oh, Erin Barlow, was like the, you know, administrative person. I think that was it. I think that was it.

Q: So did you feel like you were [coughs] joining, almost like joining a club? I mean, was there a certain sense among the staff of, we're part of something new and exciting and—

Polland: Oh, definitely.

Q: —pioneering?

Polland: Definitely. And just kind of like, again, roll-up-the-sleeves type of work. Like everyone did everything. I feel like I was, all I did was move benches, [laughs].

Q: [laughs].

Polland: It was a good workout. yes, no, absolutely. And it was just a lovely group of people, you know, and it was a very nice place to work. I think the office, at that point, the offices were on the south side of Canal. It was kind of a dumpy office, but, [00:10:00] you know, being connected to the synagogue. And I think the other source of energy were the docents, you know, that had been there for quite a while. But, you know, were very excited about the work and just

being able to kind of learn from them too. And of course that, you know, 2004 was not the very beginning, as you know. And so there was so much work that had already been done by people. American History Workshop with Richard Rabinowitz had done all these reports. The National Landmark Report, Amy Waterman had done so much work. So, you know, being able to kind of look through all of that and get inspired by those ideas and then, you know, make those into programs. And then also taking my own work that I had done for my dissertation and, you know, weaving that into the course.

Q: So what did you do? Did you develop educational programs for particular ages? Public school kids, or what?

Polland: [laughs], I think really my main job was to cover Sunday. They needed someone [laughs] to come in on Sunday. [00:11:00] So like on Sunday, I would come in and open the building, even though, like it was—it was always like the congregation left the door open. So when I walked into the building, I had no idea what else I would be—it was kind of crazy.

Q: They left it unlocked?

Polland: They often left it unlocked ’cause I think, yeah. I mean, I don’t think they were doing it to be, but. But it was—

Q: No, they just didn’t think about it.

Polland: Right.

Q: God will provide.

Polland: God will secure the building. So Sundays was just kind of running it for the public and organizing the docents for the tours. And at that point, the building was, you could go into the sanctuary, so the roof had been like, stabilized, right. So we just did tours. I gave a lot of tours. And then I think Tuesdays and Thursdays, I also had to cover the synagogue. So, you know, part of it was just everyone kind of covered the spaces in the synagogue. I had to organize the docents and teach the docents.

Q: How did you teach the docents?

Polland: [00:12:00] Just going over like the tours or having meetings and talking about the tours and what we were supposed to do. And I eventually wrote a new docent manual. There had been a docent manual, and then I kind of rewrote it. Although, of course, docents being docents, some of them wanted to keep the old way. So that was always hard, right, because—

Q: So you rewrote—Richard [phonetic] [00:12:20] wrote an original docent manual.

Polland: Okay.

Q: Did you ever see that or did you not know that it was there?

Polland: I'm sure it was there, and I think maybe that's what—I think because I rewrote it when we reopened the building—so it had been closed for the restoration.

Q: Oh, yeah.

Polland: And so the old docent manual, that probably was what Richard had written, didn't match anymore because it said, "Look at the open," you know.

Q: Right.

Polland: And now we had a restored space, so we had to weave in more about the architectural process that got us from one point to another. So I'm sure drew on a lot of the old, you know, wasn't a replacement of the old as much as an updating.

Q: Right. So it still exists? [00:13:00]

Polland: Oh, I have no idea. I doubt it. I think they've—I'm sure they've rewritten it because I mean, I just don't know.

Q: Which kind of classes? I mean, was it public schools or were you getting synagogue kids?

Polland: On Sundays, it was like the synagogues, you know, from New Jersey or from Connecticut, or for where? Westchester. And then during the week, it was public school kids. And I loved the public-school kids because it was mostly PS42, PS1, I think, on Henry Street. So it was, you know, Chinese kids. And they related more to the story I found than the kids on Sunday because that experience of being an immigrant or thinking about what culture, what traditions you have, what do you keep, what do you let go? So I remember making up this question for them, which was like, "Let's say we all had to move. Let's say we're all gonna move to Brazil. And what's your favorite holiday and how might you [00:14:00] celebrate it there?" There was something like that where the kids—and they all said their favorite holiday was their birthday, [laughs].

Q: Their what?

Polland: Their birthday. They love their birthdays. But then, you know, they talked about different holidays and whether you would do them in different places. Would you do Thanksgiving in a different place? So that then led to thinking about how do we understand this building as something—ideas that people had from their old country, and what did they do with them when they got here? And how some things would be the same, some things would be different, and some things they wouldn't do anymore.

Q: So did you find that most, or at least the public school children, had they ever been in a synagogue? Did they know what a synagogue was?

Polland: No, I don't think so. But a lot of them were curious because they had, you know, walked by. Or maybe some had been there for egg rolls and egg cream or something. But for the most part, this was like the—so we did a program for Passover, and I think we did a program for Hanukkah. So it was like centered around Jewish holidays but still very much about immigration, [00:15:00] I think.

Q: So I always felt, and tell me if you shared this feeling. I always felt that one of the great advantages of Eldridge or one of the values of Eldridge was the fact that students or adults or whatever would never basically go into any synagogue and learn what is a synagogue and what is the bimah, and what is the arc, and blah, blah. And I always felt that this was something Eldridge could be—it was unique in that process.

Polland: Totally. And it was unique both for people who were Jewish and people who weren't Jewish, because I think even people who are Jewish, they may not think about the history of certain rituals, but this was a place to kind of think about maybe things they knew in a different way, because it was almost like a sec—it was a sacred space and [00:16:00] a secular space at the same time. So I think that offered a certain kind of freedom.

Q: And do you remember any particular reactions that sort of sticks out in your mind?

Polland: I just remember people getting so excited about being able to find the grooves in the floor, you know, and using that to explain shuckling and, you know—

Q: It's so interesting because I remember when I had a—when the light bulb went on in my head about after when the pews went out and there were the floors. And at that moment I said, "We are not redoing the floors, period." And that became such an important—a teachable moment.

Polland: So teachable. I mean, that was like the best decision you could ever make. I mean, just because people respond to this idea that, you know, it was the most concrete example of how people make an imprint on a building and shape a building, and that [00:17:00] the building can be used to bring them to life. So it just kind of sets the whole entree for the whole experience of thinking about, you know, what are other ways now that we can see people's imprints on a building. Because I think a lot of times people see a building and they think it's been done. Like they don't realize that it was pieced together. And that's the beauty of Eldridge is to being able to like, take it apart and put it back together again with their minds, you know.

Q: So the one memory that sticks in my mind, because I wasn't there for all the education programs, but I will never forget the group of kids. Maybe I don't remember which public school, maybe there was one white kid and that kid was not Jewish.

Polland: Okay.

Q: So they were all Asian, Black, whatever. And I remember one little kid looking up and around and saying, "This reminds me of my mosque."

Polland: Oh, that's so cool. yes. [00:18:00]

Q: And I loved that he could make that connection. It was such an important educational piece. And I think it is still today because I don't think that the kids that age today have any clue. Now, I don't know if they still have the same kind of educational programs. But do you have any of those moments that—

Polland: yes. No, I mean, I think that the—there is something very New York about Eldridge Street in the sense that it's a place that people of all backgrounds can feel comfortable in and excited about, right. But that, like, that's the interesting thing. It's like it's a comfortable place to learn, but the beauty of it is so unique that it, like, you know, and it inspires that curiosity. But like, you know, if you have a good person teaching there, and everyone has the ques—they're brimming over with questions, you don't have to be of any background in particular to walk in that building [00:19:00] and have the curiosity excited by it. And so that's what makes it such a resonant place.

So when I was giving walking tours, you know, it's one thing to be walking around and being like, "Okay, look at that building. Do you notice the date on it?" You know, and talking about it. But then, you know, as a teacher, it was just such a relief to then be in the building, and you didn't have to give as much of a presentation, but you could respond to the questions that people had no matter what background they are. And kids asked wonderful questions always.
And one memory that's coming to my head, but it was a Jewish day school, and it wasn't one I taught, but a docent—no, it was one I taught, but it was a docent overhearing this conversation. And I was talking about the murals that were on either side of the arc, and that the legend was

that these are overlooking Jerusalem, and that when the mashiach comes, the Messiah comes, the curtains will open and you'll be able to see Jerusalem. So that was like a story that had been passed down. [00:20:00]

Q: I don't even know that story.

Polland: Well, apparently the docent then overheard this girl say to her friend, "When the mashiach comes, I'm gonna rent this place out for a party." [laughs]

Q: [laughs].

Polland: So just, you know, the way in which you can talk about stories. And the thing I remember too, and this was what was nice for me, because I was doing research too, was I was looking up the kosher meat boycott of 1902. And Paula Hyman had written this really wonderful article about it that was very important because it was about, you know, women's role in the family, women's role in the street. Just there had been so much attention to Jewish daughters as people who went out on strike and stuff. But the mothers were kind of viewed as being inside the home. And this article kind of dispelled that myth because it spoke about women who, when the price of kosher meat jumped from twelve cents to eighteen cents a pound, they organized, and they, you know, they went, [00:21:00] they attacked the butcher shops and they had a strike and the boycott of the meat and all the stuff, rented halls, gave talks. And then she mentioned something about women on Saturdays on the Sabbath going to synagogue services and

interrupting the services, saying that this was a cause of social justice. And because of that, they could interrupt the Torah service. So I was like, I wonder if they went to Eldridge Street.

Q: The meat story, [unclear] [00:21:26].

Polland: Exactly.

Q: yes.

Polland: So I was like, I followed her footnotes to the Yiddish Press to be like, you know, I wonder if they went to Eldridge Street. And sure enough, one of the synagogues they went to was Eldridge Street. And I just remember like, falling off my chair, I was so excited to see this. But it then forever more, that could be a story that we told and, you know, really bring the bimah to life, really let people understand, yes, there was a division between men and women, and yet the women are like changing their role in the community. And the kind of what's happening outside is starting to filter inside. Even though this was a [00:22:00] orthodox synagogue that separated men and women, there was so much change with regard to kind of women's role in the house, too.

Q: Well, that's interesting because people—I guess Eldridge became a good vehicle to teach how active women were not just staying home because praying was for men. And that is a wonderful story. As well, I remember I used to say about the fixture that was upstairs, which is totally inappropriate for the building.

Polland: yes. That like crystal one, right?

Q: Right.

Polland: yes.

Q: But it was clear that the women said, “This is our space. We’re gonna do what we want. You do your thing downstairs. We’re doing our thing upstairs.”

Polland: Yes.

Q: So it’s a touch of individuality that is nowhere else in the building. And that is—

Polland: Totally. I love that.

Q: —the women’s statement.

Polland: I love that. yes.

Q: Did you have people [00:23:00] question—when you went to work for Eldridge, in the early days, a lot of people did not understand Eldridge. And I remember in particular a strong feminist friend of mine saying, “Roberta, what do you wanna restore an orthodox synagogue for? They’ve

never let us, you know, be equal." And I said, "It was not about where we pray; it was about our history." Did you get people questioning you about why were you working at this place? What was so important about it?

Polland: Oh, sure. I mean, I think not so much from a feminist standpoint, but more—I remember when I defended my dissertation. So I started working in the spring of 2004, and I had finished, you know, I was almost done with my dissertation, but I still had some work to do. And then I defended the dissertation in June, I think it was June of 2004. And I remember going to the defense and, you know, [00:24:00] I passed the defense, but I had to wait outside while they were discussing it. And I heard, you know, and I only could have made sense of it later, but what did they, something about, "What is she doing, you know, doing this, you know, whatever? Why doesn't she do an academic thing? What is she doing on the Lower East Side? Or what is she doing in this job?" And I just remember, one of the persons, "Oh, she loves the Lower East Side. Let her do the," like, you know, but like, it—

Q: They didn't get it.

Polland: They didn't get it. But it wasn't—I don't know, but it was something where—I don't know. I guess it's what you were saying earlier about prestige, that people joined the board. If people, whoever joined the board of Eldridge or the Tenement Museum weren't doing it for kind of social or prestige, I guess I wasn't going to work for social reasons or prestige. It just was something that really evolved in an organic way where I had the experience teaching there in and around the place, and I just, I felt something there and I didn't know [00:25:00] exactly what it

would lead to. I don't know, I sensed that that was a place that I could be creative and bring what I had learned to bear in different ways.

Q: So did you get a sense that this was sort of representative of the—you know, it was a point in time in our New York history, and maybe by [20]04, there was some awareness. But synagogues had never drawn the kind of interest that churches did. Everybody knew Trinity Church or Cathedral or whatever. Never a synagogue. And I think something must have been awakening at the time. Did you feel that? That the city, that there was a new awareness growing beyond the synagogue?

Polland: That might be so. I mean, I'm trying to think that through. [00:26:00] I also feel like by the time I got there in 2004, you and others had done so much work to raise the visibility of the place and to kind of make a claim for that kind of history. So that I think that was already in the air and people were responding to that by that time. Whereas I imagine in 1986, it was [laughs] a completely—so, you know, by the time I came in, you and others had done so much work to do that. So people knew about it. You know, it was a mix of people who knew about it and had respect for it, but then others being completely surprised by it and getting that sense of discovering something, which was also exciting.

Q: So how specifically did you shape the education programs? And did you change it according to age?

Polland: I don't even remember. I feel like there was nothing. I'm not a formal educator, so I wasn't like a [00:27:00] curriculum writer or anything. I think I would just like put ideas together on a page and have tips if this was this age or that. But, you know, the thing is, Roberta, that it was mostly me giving the tours.

Q: Oh.

Polland: So it wasn't like I had to train other people, because if it was school kids, I think I did it. I don't think—only a few of the docents did the school groups. So it was not sophisticated. It was just a matter of kind of being there and responding to who came in the door. And almost because I only was, because the education department was a staff of one, [laughs], there wasn't a formalized, I didn't have to write as much stuff down, I guess, because it was [unclear] [00:27:41].

Q: When did you decide to actually write the book?

Polland: That came from visitors too. So I was giving a tour to a gentleman and his daughter who went to, God, one of Upper East Side private schools.

Q: Stop for a minute. I asked you about the book, but tell us what the book was. [00:28:00]

Polland: Oh, okay. So the book was a book about the history of the congregation of Eldridge Street. And I started writing it maybe in 2005 or 2006. And it came from—and we ended up, we

didn't know it at the time, but we ended up calling it Landmark Of The Spirit from Bill Moyers wonderful talk that he gave. It was such a beautiful quote.

Q: Who gave?

Polland: Bill Moyers.

Q: Oh.

Polland: You had brought him—

Q: Oh, yeah, yeah. No, I—

Polland: —many years ago. yes.

Q: I still have a copy of his remarks, how the stones speak and—

Polland: yes, they published in brick and mortar.

Q: Right.

Polland: yes. Beautiful. So—

Q: Bill Moyers, I should note, was at that time, and as far as I'm concerned, still the preeminent TV, I guess, [00:29:00] producer of various programs. He was a friend of Bill Josephson.

Polland: Okay.

Q: Or Bill was doing work for him and Bill asked him to speak. And I guess it was a benefit or whatever. And he connected the history of Eldridge to the history of his people in a way that was just universal.

Polland: It was beautiful.

Q: And "Stones Speak". So that's where the idea came.

Polland: yes. I mean, we ended up going back to that for the title for Landmark of the Spirit. And my words were nowhere near as beautiful [laughs] as his. And that was—the way that that came about was I was giving a tour to a girl maybe in eighth grade who was at one of the private schools, Brearley? I can't remember which one. [00:30:00] And she brought her father, because I think the school had made an assignment of go look at a New York landmark or something and this was on the list. So they came and I gave them a tour, and she did her report. But the husband—the father said, you know, "My wife is an editor. Has anyone written about this?" And I said, "Well, not about, you know, the history like this." So that's how that began.

Q: Oh, really? So was it through his wife that you did the book?

Polland: She was an editor at Yale University Press.

Q: At Yale? But your own PhD work must have been—

Polland: Separate.

Q: But it must have been helpful to this.

Polland: Oh, yeah, of course. Because my dissertation was on the religious lives of European Jews and how they changed, but how that was more of an adaptation as opposed to just a dismissal. So the historiography was largely about, they came and they gave up religion and blah, blah, blah. And mine was more about the nuances of that adaptation, looking more at women and women's roles, particularly with regard to the Sabbath and [00:31:00] highlighting the fact that the Sabbath coming to—For every other group, Irish, Italian, Germans, if you came, Sunday was the day off, and that was fine. But for Jews, to have Saturday as a workday posed right away, an obstacle to religious life because Saturday was a workday for so long. So how that was resolved and negotiated was kind of what I was interested in. And so in some ways, the synagogue was different because I had been writing more about people who were not formal synagogue members but were creating and carving out religious lifestyles within their tenements or tenement, if at a synagogue, a tenement synagogue. But the general background, of course, was so key to that book.

Q: For research on that book, where did you find the research?

Polland: So there were the books we had been talking about that were at the American Jewish Historical Society, record books, ledgers, others. [00:32:00] There were minute books that you had translated, or the museum had translated earlier. I think Daniel Soyer and [unclear] Moore [phonetic] [00:32:07] from YIVO had translated them. Not all of them, but a bunch. So I just remember going—

Q: Sam Norris's [phonetic] [00:32:12] father.

Polland: Oh, interesting.

Q: yes. And as I recall, the reason he—more than anyone else, there was a special, there was a uniqueness to the Yiddish of those books because apparently it reflected the transition—

Polland: The Americanization.

Q: And that there was a lot of German—

Polland: Okay.

Q: —thrown into it and English.

Polland: Okay.

Q: And he was particularly knowledgeable.

Polland: Oh, that's so—

Q: But not, just not a regular Yiddish interpretation.

Polland: And I think there, if I remember correctly, there was one gentleman who had been like the secretary of the congregation for a long time. [00:33:00] I'm blanking on his name, but if I—I should have looked at the book before I got here, but he would've been writing the notes. So it's like that one, it would've been a result, right, of that one person who had a particular style. 'Cause I think he kept the notes and the minutes for decades.

Q: Which makes me just think as an aside, that if you have a copy to donate to the American Jewish Historical Society, so they have it to go with—

Polland: Sure. Of course.

Q: —this archive.

Polland: Of course. yes.

Q: It would be kind of smart.

Polland: yes. I think, I'm pretty sure they have a copy in their library. But, of course, I would be happy to—

Q: So how long were you education director?

Polland: So I was there from the spring of 2004, like maybe February of 2004 until December of 2008.

Q: And what—

Polland: [00:34:00] And I think at one point, they changed it from Director of Education to Vice President of Education, but it—

Q: It was all just—

Polland: It didn't really matter. It was still only me, [laughs].

Q: And over that period of time, did you see—did you recognize a change in terms of the school groups and the awareness of Eldridge? Was there more awareness out in the city about Eldridge that you started with the classes?

Polland: yes. And I think those grew and then, but the thing was is that at some point, we closed to visitors because the restoration was heating up. And so there was—I don't know how long we were closed for. A year? Maybe less than a year, maybe a little more than a year. I don't remember. That would've been about 2006, 2007.

Q: yes. That's when we put the interior scaffolding up, probably—[00:35:00]

Polland: Yes. Oh, it's so beautiful.

Q: —to do the ceiling and—right.

Polland: But I still loved to sneak people in to go see that. And being able to walk up there was just, I'll never forget that.

Q: Right.

Polland: Evergreen did the painting right? And I'll never for—I mean, I think that was, you know, visually to see those pieces come together and then to go to the stained glass studio where a gentleman in DUMBO [Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass], I think was putting the pieces together, and to see it kind of laid out and to see the way they had traced the windows. But at that point, okay, so then what we did is that's when we created those Limud tables, the kind of projections of, one table was about Lower East Side history, and one was about synagogue architecture. But I just remember that because one of the games was like, you know, you could

use your finger to drag colors into the frames. And then on the Lower East Side table, we made a map of the Lower East Side to kind of situate the synagogue with [00:36:00] the Forward Building or Jarmulowsky's Bank, or HIAS [Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society] or these other organizations. So I think at that point, I was doing more research about that as opposed to teaching just because we were closed. But I think when it reopened, when the synagogue reopened in December of 2007—

Q: Right.

Polland: —if I remember correctly, that was such a, that was, I think, the raising of a aware, a lot of, you know, publicity was placed on that. And there was that opening. And I think Frank Rich spoke.

Q: Frank Rich spoke?

Polland: He spoke, yeah. I think I had to write his notes for him, [laughs] because I don't think he had spent much time.

Q: Well, I remember that he mentioned it in something he wrote.

Polland: Okay.

Q: But I don't remember him speaking.

Polland: I think he was there.

Q: I'm sure you're right. My memory is not reliable.

Polland: Well, you know, one of my favorite memories, Roberta, though, is of you going up in the—

Q: The—[00:37:00]

[Side conversation]

Q: The cherry picker.

Polland: The cherry picker to put the finial, to put the star on top of the finial. That was really exciting.

Q: With my daughter.

Polland: Yes, that's right. It was, I guess that would've been the fall of—I mean, that was just like a moment in the restoration, but it happened before we formally reopened. I feel like it was like two or three years before. But that was—

Q: I remember saying at some point, "I will be in every inch of this building when it's finished."

Polland: [laughs]

Q: The attic and then the scaffolding, with the finial, which was great, not only because it was so significant, but the view from up there was fantastic.

Polland: I can't imagine. No, I remember that. And you were so brave. Like, just going up there, [laughs].

Q: [laughs].

Polland: Never looking down, just completely looking at what was ahead.

Q: I think Ken Stein actually mentioned that not long ago, in the last couple of years, saying, "I remember Roberta up there."

Polland: [laughs].

Q: I didn't remember when he got involved, but I—

Polland: yes, he was involved then. [00:38:00] yes, yeah.

Q: He was—and I do remember having to persuade him to come on the board. But that that should stick in his memory always kind of amused me.

Polland: No, it was great. It was great. No, and I, yeah, remember your daughter coming in. So—

Q: And Frank Rich spoke. And who else that you remember?

Polland: Who was it? I'm sure you spoke.

Q: Oh, yeah.

Polland: I'm sure Amy [phonetic][00:38:27] spoke. Was Amy there or Bonnie [phonetic] [00:38:31] there? Well, at that point, but I think Amy was there. Amy came back for that, I'm pretty sure.

Q: yes, I don't remember it either.

Polland: I know there was another day that Laurinda [phonetic][00:38:43] brought Adam Gopnik. And so Adam Gopnik did a—

Q: Oh, right.

Polland: —taste of the talk of the town.

Q: Well, we did a couple of evening programs. We had—was her Jane Jacobs lecture series.

Polland: Oh, I remember that. yes, yeah.

Q: And Adam Gopnik was one of the speakers. [00:39:00] And it was, yeah, it was—I mean, it's all in the records. I can't remember half of it. And what made you decide to leave?

Polland: So I remember, so I think one of the things that was really, at a certain point, I was doing the school kids programs, but Amy Waterman had put together a really nice grant, bringing scholars to Eldridge Street and having carved out three or four humanity themes or areas of study. And the grant came in. And so I was able to—

Q: Do you remember what those areas of study were?

Polland: yes. I think, religious life, kind of religious worship. I think Yiddish cultural life. Political life. I think there was a fourth, but I can't quite remember, but I can look that up. And so I was then tasked with kind of [00:40:00] administering the grant. And so I brought in different scholars like Jeffrey Shandler, Tony Michaels, [unclear] [00:40:11], oh, and architecture, of course. So, what's that guy's name? Sam—

Q: Oh, from—

Polland: You know who I mean, from Syracuse.

Q: From the Jewish heri—

Polland: Yes, that's right.

Q: Sam—

Polland: Sam Gruber.

Q: Gruber. Who's still, I think is still at it.

Polland: Still active. yes. And bringing them in for individual talks to teach our docents to do some writing, to do some public programs. And so I just kept then writing NEH grants, because NEH grants to me were a way to kind of bring scholars and content and help for me to merge and translate—

Q: Age grants?

Polland: NEH, National Endowment for the Humanities grants. And so we, I did a bunch of those and then did one, an NEH grant called, like, for a teachers institute. So we got a hundred American, [00:41:00] from all across the country, school teachers to come for a week-long program, where we did walking tours of the Lower East Side to highlight the different immigrant

and migrant groups that had come in. So we had your friend, Christopher Moore, do Black history. Lovely, wonderful. That was such a highlight.

Q: I forgot about him.

Polland: yes. What a wonderful—

Q: He's the one who, I don't know that he discovered, but he was the voice for the African burial ground.

Polland: Burial ground. yes. Absolutely.

Q: He and I served on the Landmarks Commission.

Polland: That's right. That's right. Wonderful person. And then—

Q: I forgot about that.

Polland: Jack Tchen to do Chinese American history and has [unclear][00:41:50]—

Q: Jack Tchen had started the Chinese—

Polland: MOCA.

Q: —history.

Polland: It was Chinatown project, right? Chinatown History Project—

Q: Right, right.

Polland: —before it became MOCA. That's right. [00:42:00] So we did all these walking tours, and it was, I had to do it twice. So one week in July and one week in August, each time for 50 school teachers. We had to find them housing. We had to—

Q: Wow.

Polland: It was massive undertaking, not just programmatically, but also administratively. But it was just me. Like there was no help, because the way that staff was arranged was to do other things. And I think I was given a docent or a volunteer to help me with it all. And they all worked out, but I think I remember finishing those and just saying like, "I can't," in the sense of, unless there's more support, I can't continue to do these things. Because as wonderful as the place is, as wonderful as the history was, I just felt I couldn't grow, you know?

Q: What do you mean by more support? [00:43:00]

Polland: Just even more staff to kind of help. So there was a creation of a Visitor Services Department at the time, and I just, I thought it was—and I understand. There's all sorts of things, but that the Visitor Services Department had two people in it, and the education department had one. [laughs] And I just felt like, well, that's, I mean, what can, you know, structurally. But, you know, I was there, I was a young mother at the time too. And—

Q: Who was director at that time?

Polland: Bonnie, who was wonderful. She got the project done. And I can say wonderful things. But I mean, I think—

Q: What project did she get done?

Polland: I mean, the building, I guess the—I mean, lots of people. I mean, lots of people. yes. But yes. And—

Q: I think at that point, it was all the decorative stuff that was—

Polland: You're right. It was the stained-glass windows, the painting.

Q: Right.

Polland: It's all the stuff that was so visible.

Q: Right.

Polland: And so—

Q: Did you ask for more support for the—? [00:44:00]

Polland: I'm sure I did. And I don't remember exactly, I don't remember exactly. But I just kind of—there was just a moment where I feel like I, and that was like at the end of the summer or the fall where I kind of had hit a wall. And I didn't search for a job. I wasn't looking for a job. I was just kind of feeling kind of—

Q: Burned out.

Polland: yes. Burned out. And then what happened was, at some point, when we were getting ready to reopen, the Tenement Museum had come to do a tour, and I led a tour for them. And so then, I think it was Barry Roseman, who was like their COO. He approached Bonnie to say, "We'd like to talk to Annie to invite her to come." So I remember then Bonnie taking me for coffee and saying that they were gonna approach me. And I was like, "Oh, okay. I don't know." And I met with them, and then I just, I kind of realized that that was something I had to do if I ever wanted to have staff and grow. Like, so that was—

Q: And Bonnie was accepting of? [00:45:00]

Polland: yes. She said she understood. yes. She's like, "Go, you know, go talk. It's under," you know, I think she understood. I don't think there was any—

Q: Who replaced you?

Polland: So I don't think they replaced that position exactly, because by that point, it was, you know, I was technically education but had been doing more programs and stuff too. And Hannah did programs too so Hanna was already there. Miriam Bader. Miriam Bader, who had been hired as the second visitor services person, who had an education background, took over. And she was brilliant in terms of kids and school programs and all of that. So Miriam did that for a couple years. And then I hired her to come to the [laughs] Tenement Museum.

Q: What was the vision at that point of Eldridge? I mean, in the beginning, we had a very specific vision, which was not just [00:46:00] the restoration of the building, but the history that that building directly represented. And that it was unique in the city. No other place could interpret that history the way Eldridge could. At that point, things had evolved. So did you have a sense that the vision had changed, or what was the vision?

Polland: I think—I don't remember is mostly it, but I, in recollections, which can be of course, you know, changed by time and all of that, I think that was part of me hitting that wall of kind of I wasn't sure what—I wasn't sure what the next step was. And I think that's a common thing in the course of an institution to kind of, for so long, a lot of it was—

Q: About the restoration.

Polland: About the restoration. So I think that was this natural point [00:47:00] where the restoration was over and—

Q: What replaced it?

Polland: The bi— I don't know.

Q: Oh. So it wasn't information as you were leaving?

Polland: I don't, I mean, I think it was always a continuity of saying, this should be a cultural center. This should be a place where people of all backgrounds can learn. That was very much still part of the ethos of the place, which I very much supported.

Q: Do you remember some of the exhibits? And what were the memorable programs or exhibits—

Polland: So I think the exhi—

Q: —while you were there?

Polland: yes. I think the exhibits started later after I left.

Q: Oh. Because then—because they—

Polland: Nancy [Johnson] came later. Who, Nancy is wonderful, the curator. She came after I left. So—

Q: And until the restoration was complete, we really couldn't have, although we did have stuff downstairs.

Polland: yes. Oh, yes. [00:48:00] I mean, I love that stuff. Like the gavel and the signs that would say "The Saturday morning services are early, and you can—" Oh, I love that stuff. So that stuff was there. I think we hung that up as part of like a permanent exhibition.

Q: Right.

Polland: The burning of the mortgage. All that stuff was so great.

Q: It was kind of amazing because we had a kind of random assortment of signs.

Polland: yes.

Q: But by—

Polland: Putting them together.

Q: —interpreting them together, you got more of a picture than we could ever have wanted. I remember the one sign was inviting people to bring, before Pesach—.

Polland: Yes, that's right. The challahs, yeah.

Q: You know, to sell or whatever it was called.

Polland: Where did those signs come from? I don't—were they donated or did you get them? [00:49:00]

Q: Well, it's complicated.

Polland: Okay.

Q: But years earlier, there had been a group of young people who were rescuing these signs as synagogues were being torn down.

Polland: Okay.

Q: And artifacts. And, in fact, I don't remember if Amy and I spoke of this during her interview. But the group disbanded, but they had stored all the artifacts with David Divec-Moss [phonetic], whatever his name was, at the Burial Society on East Broadway. And Sandy Divec-Moss [00:49:42], Joy Ungleider [phonetic] [00:49:46] and I went up there and amidst all the dust and grime and all the Torah covers, amazing.

Polland: Oh, wow.

Q: We picked out—

Polland: Got it.

Q: —what we wanted to display. [00:50:00] And I don't know what happened to all the rest of it.

Polland: The rest. Oh my gosh.

Q: So it was sort of random. But it did make a good display accompanied by the table. I forget what we call those tables. I love those. I don't—

Polland: I know. Those were so—

Q: —know why we ever got rid of those. I mean, they—

Polland: I know. It broke my heart because they were—the whole point of it was that when it was Shabbat, it would just look like regular tables. Like these beautifully, these carpenters made these beautiful tables.

Q: Yes.

Polland: And at one point, they didn't wanna upkeep it. And so they got screened because it was—the technology at the time, which was brand new to do this, to do the projection and to be able to have the touch movement without it—

Q: It was fabulous.

Polland: —working with shadows. It was one of Potion Designs first, and they, you know, went on to do so many others. And I'll always, that project too was very much, [00:51:00] we just had a few months to put this stuff together. And, you know, now they have two-year times of gestation and, what's it called? R&D, research and design and all these things. And it's like, you know, there's nothing like a deadline to like [laughs]—

Q: That's right.

Polland: —make you produce. And at some point, they didn't wanna be replacing—the bulbs for the projectors were terribly expensive. And I think at one point, the museum, you know, many years later, made the decision to not have to have those bulbs, and I don't know, and use a touch

screen instead. So it's still there, but it's in a different, it's not as magical, I think, of a format as had existed previously.

Q: So, okay. You're sort of transitioning because the Tenement Museum is offering you whatever. What was it? Education Director?

Polland: yes. Vice president for education, right.

Q: At that [00:52:00] moment at Eldridge, did you have a feeling that there was a vision of what was going forward? I'm really trying to bring it up to not necessarily to today.

Polland: Okay.

Q: But it's very different. Today, it's very much a tourist attraction. The docent tours, whatever they are, and some of the exhibits are interesting but are not related to the history of the synagogue, whether it's mezuzahs or whatever. And I think during the time you were there, there was a very direct connection to the history and what was unique about this site. Did you feel that was diminishing as you left? I mean, if they didn't replace you, [00:53:00] what else—who else was on the verge of leaving that you know of? And did you have any sense that the vision was diminishing or changing?

Polland: yes. No, I hear you. I can, I guess I can, you know, I can just speak from my personal, just feeling a little bit of a sense of frustration as I described. And then, but they did bring in

eventually, so after Miriam left, they brought in Judy. I liked her a lot. Judy [Greenspan] was a great education person. Judy Greenspan. But I think, I think there was a shift where maybe [00:54:00] because of the passage of time or— But it didn't seem to have that same sense of investing in the roots of the place and creating content based on the roots of the place in a formative way. And I don't think that was an act—I don't know that that was like an active decision as much as what happens with the passage of time if you don't invest in that. In other words, I always feel like with historic places, you get the most creativity if you know the history, if you know the space, if you know everything you can about it, then that allows you to have this—the roots allow you to expand and move forward, but you also need to feed the roots. You need to water the roots; you need to invest in it. And that's money. So how much money, I mean, and this is someone would have to do an analysis of the budget. There never was a lot of money extra. It's mostly salaries as with any non-profit. [00:55:00] But what were the priorities of leadership? And how did that manifest itself with the budget? Like what money? Eva [phonetic] [00:55:11] was raising a ton of money. Like was that, how, where was that being apportioned? And so, I don't know 'cause I didn't, you know, study that or know that.

But I just feel like—I guess another way to put it is if I had stayed and had power, I would've, drawing on the legacy of what I understood to be the legacy of what had been before, put way more emphasis on education and content and research. Although at the same time they hired—what is her name? Nancy Johnson as an archivist. So there was an investment in all of that. So I don't, I don't know 'cause I wasn't there assigned, you know.

Q: Well, Nancy, of course, is only there two or two and a half days a week. [00:56:00] So what staff positions were still existing when you left?

Polland: Well, Amy was there. Amy Milford, who had been communications but became like a deputy director, I think. And Hanna Griff in programs. And then I think Miriam Bader became the education.

Q: Who?

Polland: Miriam Bader—

Q: Don't remember her.

Polland: —became education. Lovely person, who had a good solid museum education background, and also knew Jewishness, knew—she had come from a day school education, so had knowledge too of Jewish tradition. And Eva was there. I mean, you still, it was a really good staff.

Q: So you went to the Tenement Museum and you've done an amazing job there. Talk a little about the evolu—[00:57:00] You're now on the board of the Eldridge Street Museum. I know you've had conversations at board meetings. And there was, and there is, I believe still there's tug even among the board and certainly from Bonnie on what is the vision for this. How do you see—where has the vision evolved to? What is it today that you, in contrast or in evolution from

when you were there? Because you left in [20]08 and we're now in [20]23. That's a number of years.

Polland: yes. It's so long ago. I know. And I can't really speak that much from my board experience because I haven't, I actually even wrote a note to Bonnie yesterday. I missed the board meeting. I had missed the one in December. It's just hard for me to leave [00:58:00] the Tenement [laughs] as soon as I get, you know, sucked in. And so—

Q: But what do you feel from your sense of things, even just in terms of knowing what's going on from, I mean, the Tenement Museum gets a lot, a lot of visitors. I mean, it's a real major attraction. And there's sometimes people will tell me, "yes, we took the kids. We went to the Tenement Museum." It sort of breaks my heart if they—

Polland: Because we want them to [unclear] [00:58:38].

Q: —they didn't say, "And we went the Eldridge Street Synagogue."

Polland: Right.

Q: How did we lose that connection?

Polland: Well, I mean, I can speak to, I think the Tenement Museum just [00:59:00] put more money into an education department. And I think a distinction would be that Eldridge relied on

docents, which is a wonderful thing. And the docents were wonderful. And there's only so much you can do. And at a certain point, you know, the Tenement Museum, well before me hired, part-time educators. And I think once you hire—

Q: How big is your education department?

Polland: The education department is our biggest department. So our education department, and pre-pandemic, it was different, but I would say it's about ten full-time and forty part-time people.

Q: And they're continually developing programs?

Polland: yes. And maintaining the tours that we have. So, you know, bringing new people in training. And that's, you know, that's what I spend a lot of my time on too even as the director of the institution because I understand that the tours are, that is it, [01:00:00] like that is absolutely it. It's bringing people into a space and being able to tell a story and have that story draw on the interaction between the past and the present and the objects and the people's curiosity. And I think if Eldridge, if I were to go in a time machine or what I would have said is as soon as that restoration was over, right, which was to really fundraise and invest in a professionalization of the education program, structurally. You know, so not just rely on a person or two people, or three people and volunteers, that—

Q: But that didn't happen.

Polland: That didn't happen. I think they brought in fine people and have done wonderful work, but I think it's almost like a structural thing of that there was, yeah. [01:01:00] At a certain point, you have to pay for more.

Q: Not rely on docents.

Polland: And not rely on docents. Although docents have a place and are helpful.

Q: Oh, yeah. No, docents are what they are. They're docents, they're volunteers. They love the building. They're retired from whatever their profession was, but they're not trained educators, nor are they focused on developing education programs that emerge from the history of the building.

Polland: Right. Totally. And I'm not really even a true education person. There should have been. I could do content, right, and I like to teach, but I'm not formally trained as an educator. So there should have been someone else who could write curriculum and, you know, do. And I think they found those people over time, but it was never a sense of creating a structure around them. But again, that's, I don't mean to be, I'm not trying to be critical. I'm just trying to kind of think through [01:02:00] what could have grown Eldridge in a similar path.

Q: Where do you think Eldridge now sits in the New York history? Not industry, but I mean, when we started it was nowhere. A lot of people didn't even know about it, and a few preservationists knew about it, period. End of story. Now it's very much known, not as

well-known as the Tenement Museum for sure. But where do you think it sits in the larger picture of, the New York landscape?

Polland: Well, I think in the preservation world, it's huge, right?

Q: Yes.

Polland: That there is this magnificent building, meticulously restored, one in which you walk in and have this overwhelming sense of being transported to somewhere else. And at the [01:03:00] same time, even as you're transported somewhere else, have the ability to ask questions, to be curious and to learn. So I think it's so highly regarded. And I also think there are lots of schools that love to send their students there. And I think tourists also know about it. I mean, certainly people come and often people go to both places for sure. So I think it's really highly regarded among educators and others. But I don't know. I haven't done a survey. [laughs]

Q: When people ask you about your earlier work, is there something in particular that you tell them about? I mean, one of the things that we've lost, 'cause it's just a matter of time, is people have no [01:04:01] idea how long and hard and transformative the project was. And I don't mean it in a—at the time we didn't real—we knew it was hard, but we just knew it was hard.

Polland: And that is.

Q: And now people take a lot of it for granted. Do you have that sense? Do you think—

Polland: Oh, I mean, I think in general, with any kind of like public history site or whatever, no. People have no idea what is behind it. I think often they go, they have an experience, but they don't think at all about what led up to it, or that—I don't know that the public thinks that much about that.

Q: I think that's probably true.

Polland: Do—yeah.

Q: —of a lot of historic restorations. [01:05:00] I mean—

Polland: yes. I think—

Q: —people have no idea, the buildings that they love today, that was a fight to keep them alive, let alone, restored.

Polland: Which is why it's like the responsibility of the educators to bring that to life, so that people can appreciate it. But that was when, you know, I remember Amy Milford and I were like, you have to, they were finishing the restoration and there was only like one piece of lathe that was left open. And we said, you know, keep that there on the second floor. But it almost got to the point of like, restoration, restoration, restoration. But like, so there's that one patch that was saved. But sometimes I want, well, and I will say this, and this is gonna be highly, highly

controversial, and I know that I am a minority of one in this, but I really loved the glass block. I loved the glass block because it was such an interruption in what you were seeing that it begged the questions. And I still think what the—I totally get the—

Q: Well, it's interesting and let's [01:06:00] explain the glass blocks.

Polland: Sure.

Q: There are four arched windows above and behind the bimah that originally, we had been told were stained glass and had blown out during the hurricane of [19]38 or whatever.

Polland: 1938.

Q: Paul Goldberger once said to me that doesn't make sense because there was no history of windows being blown out from the hurricane. But along with everything that had deteriorated in the building just over time and neglect, the buildings, the windows were fragile. At some point, they needed to either be restored or replaced, and there was never any money to do restoration. So in the [19]30s and into the [19]40s, the very contemporary thing to do [01:07:00] was to use glass block. So they put glass block in those four windows.

When we started and all through the restoration, people would say to me, "What are you gonna do about the glass block?" Because clearly, in that space had been a rose window, which was very, historically very interesting because rarely did a synagogue or a church have two rose

windows. And this was our east wall, which is the critical one. But there was one on the west wall that we were restoring. And we had no record of what that window was, although we could have safely assumed it was a mirror image of the one on the west wall. So people would ask me, "What are you gonna do about the window?" [01:08:00]

And I would say, "You know, I may never be here by the time that something happens and the people in charge will decide, and I will not care because that will mean the rest of the building is saved." So lo and behold, it came time that we were able to consider what to do, much to my surprise. And true to form, I said, "The board will decide. I have no preference to keep it or to replace it." And the board started talking about it, and we had artists, glass artists volunteering. We didn't have to even have a competition.

Polland: yes.

Q: They were just submitting plans. And lo and behold came this spectacular, [01:09:00] what's her name?

Polland: Kiki Smith.

Q: Kiki Smith—

Polland: Who's famous. yes.

Q: And it was perfectly the right thing to do. And we now were able to say this building spanned three centuries. Built in the nineteenth, restored in the twentieth—

Polland: Oh, that's really nice.

Q: —modernized in the twenty-first.

Polland: That's really nice. yes.

Q: All of which was great. So what to do with the glass block? And it was a visitor who suggested that we reproduce the shapes of those windows with the glass block, downstairs, and then dedicate—

Polland: And still be able to—

Q: —the blocks as a fundraising thing. So I think we had, it's $1,800 per—

Polland: For a glass. Which was perfect.

Q: Right.

Polland: Well, and it's, I mean, that those glass blocks to me represented this other chapter in the synagogue's history. The ones of the people who were still on the Lower East side, [01:10:00]

maybe because they had a store or whatever. Or even if they had moved away, because by virtue of their store being in the neighborhood, they were still connected. But that these kind of probably small businessmen saved to get the glass block put in. And I always thought about if they had put a stained-glass window in, then they might not have had the money to pay off the mortgage, which happened right around the same time. So just like thinking about, you know, that glass block to me brings to life this chapter. And it's still in the building, so it's still a good thing.

Q : Well, I have to say that at the time, since a lot of that discussion was going on in the [19]80s and [19]90s, and into the early part of the twenty-first century, there was not a synagogue that I had ever seen with contemporary stained glass that I would allow at Eldridge. They were—

Polland: And it's a beautiful, [01:11:00] it plays off, I mean, this, it is a beautiful window.

Q: And this was just so unexpectedly perfect.

Polland: Yes. And everyone loves it. So that also I think, helps situate Eldridge Street as a place where artists, you could go look at it purely for kind of like artistic reason too, which is important.

Q: And we used to have exhibits, artists, I mean, some of our exhibits were fabulous.

Polland: I remember that there was one, this is before my time, but there was one of the dresses—

Q: I was just gonna say—

Polland: —I was, that was very evocative.

Q: The dresses were hung—

Polland: On the women's balcony.

Q: —upstairs, and each one represented an immigrant who had been through Ellis Island.

Polland: I thought that was really nice.

Q: That one always resonated for me. And then there was one that had the clothes line across from one corner of the balcony to the other—

Polland: Oh, neat.

Q: —with children's drawings hanging from it.

Polland: That's really nice. yes.

Q: [01:12:00] Evocative of the old tenement stuff. And there was the one with that fabulous woman who had the—

Polland: The Projected.

Q: The Projected.

Polland: Rose, rose, rose something. Her name was Rose, I can't remember. But she did the cartoon, the animation through the rose window.

Q: At the front of the building—

Polland: That was amazing.

Q: —where you stood across the street and you saw this film across the—I don't know, how many, what are there, six windows or something like that.

Polland: yes, it was the six windows plus the Rose Window, I think. What was her name? Rose something. And I think that, like Amy must have put, I mean—

Q: Oh yeah.

Polland: That was just such an amazing sum—that was the summer of 2004.

Q: But I think in—and it may be that just over time—

Polland: Rose Bond, I think it was Rose Bond, I think.

Q: Oh yeah. Something like that.

Polland: Something like that.

Q: And I think it's a matter of the time and place. In those days, we didn't invent [01:13:00] any of those exhibitions.

Polland: People came—

Q: Those artists came to us and said, "We wanna do this." And it was a matter of responding. Whereas today, now Eldridge is in many ways taken so for granted. It doesn't have the same kind of inspiration for artists.

Polland: yes. What did they do? They did something on hotdogs. Was it something on hotdogs? An artist who painted hotdogs at Coney Island, I think. And—

Q: I don't even remember. More recently?

Polland: yes. Was it like last summer? Something like that. I don't know. And the mezuzah thing again, which is interesting, but it's like, I think you're right. You want people who come to the place to be inspired by the place and to create something for the place or that.

Q: And I think it takes particularly trained people to come up with those kind of ideas. [01:14:00] You know, it was never anything that I would ever come up with. It just was not how I thought about these things. You need those scholars to be able to understand what they're working with to be able to do something evocative of the place. Otherwise, it's like the Jewish Museum or the JCC [Jewish Community Center].

Polland: Right. Yes, exactly. Exactly. Like anything that could be anywhere. Like you wanna be— there needs to be some site specificity, I guess, in that origin.

Q: Is there any joint projects between the Tenement Museum and Eldridge?

Polland: Well, we send, like, so we always send, we give Eldridge Street as like a place to visit for visitors who come and are looking for more, or if we fell out. So that's always, but there isn't any like, formal programming, in part just because the way the Tenement is structured. [01:15:00] It's like people come in, and also right now, we're operating in a weird way because we've had to move. We have a construction site going and all of that. But—

Q: And they're really not that close. It's—

Polland: Right. It's like a, yeah.

Q: It's a hefty walk.

Polland: When I got there and we made a new walking tour, we made a walking tour that stopped at Eldridge Street. And I think later that got shaved off because it was, you have to cross Allen and go in there. But, yeah. I love, but I love that. I mean, whenever I'm giving people a tour of the neighborhood, I go, I bring people there just because it's so important. Everyone wants to see it.

Q: I think also something that has been lost and may just be, you know, what happens with these things. And I know I wrote some about this in the epilogue, I think of my second book. At least from my perspective, [01:16:00] working on this project, I observed the transition of the whole Lower East Side.

Polland: Yes.

Q: And to be able to tell that story is a very important one. And one of the great things about the Lower East Side still, although disappearing, is you can tell that story. It hasn't been wiped out. It's a classic neighborhood of urban evolution and the story of the immigrant. But what's great is it's now, it's also the story of the immigrant. It's just a different immigrant. And it doesn't matter. This is true of immigrant neighborhoods, whether it's London or New York. Immigrant neighborhoods stay immigrant neighborhoods.

Polland: And that's what makes it so interesting is finding the different layers of that.

Q: And it's just the immigrant changes. [01:17:00] Have I forgotten anything?

[Side conversation]

Q: Anything, any exclamation at the end of it? [laughs]

Polland: No. Just to thank you for doing all that work to create that building.

Q: No, I mean, you were there at a very interesting time. So that's why it's so important to get your reflections on that time. And it's part of what makes this project so important. 'Cause one cannot imagine what happened in those 30 years.

Polland: Well, and I think it's also just the other thing is thinking about how the place really attracts good people. And so that there were so much good work to work with and so many interesting people to meet. And I feel fortunate that I was there at a time where you still had people who had memories of the Lower East Side. It was still a little bit, you know, it was mostly the children of immigrants [01:18:00] who would tell their stories. But, you know, to be able to hear those in that space—

Q: We did it, we did some oral histories.

Polland: I know. And I know you love the one where the woman talked about the hat, right?

Q: No, the fish.

Polland: The fish. Okay.

Q: She came, her husband and she, I think were fish mongers down at South Street, Seaport. And she came dressed very fancy with a fancy hat and everything. But somebody in the congregation commented, “But she still smelled like fish.” [laughs]

Polland: Smelled like fish. [laughs] So funny. I love those. yes.

Q: I mean, it’s so important. The other thing about the oral histories is, I remember there were several people who claimed that their father, their father was head of the congregation and they had the most important seat in the house.

Polland: Oh, interesting.

Q: And they were probably all right, but there were many at different times. [01:19:00]

Polland: There were many seats.

Q: yes. But , you know, their memory sort of evolved.

Polland: Yes.

Q: And I don't know what ha—I think Nancy has put some of those recollections—

Polland: Oh, good.

Q: —on the website.

Polland: Digitized.

Q: I don't know if there's—or they came down, but I know she has them. And we will include them in the project, because we also have interviews with Bookson [phonetic][01:19:26].

Polland: Oh, good.

Q: And I believe Markowitz.

Polland: yes. That sounds right.

Q: And that's all so important. I mean, it's—

Polland: yes.

Q: I still don't think a lot of people quite realize the potency of this story.

Polland: yes. It's an amazing story.

Q: I mean, it's new—it's not just a Jewish immigrant story; it's a New York story.

Polland: It's a New York story. Totally.

Q: It's an American history story. It's all these layers.

Polland: yes.

Q: In one extraordinary building.

Polland: I think you have a new book to write, Roberta. [laughs] [01:20:00]

Q: Oh, no, no, no. I did that in the epilogue—

Polland: I know.

Q: —of the second book. I've done it.

Polland: [laughs]. Awesome.

Q: Done. Over.

Polland: Over.

Q2: I have one quick question. It's not a quick question. It's a quick question. It's a long answer. And that is the—and you were kind of there in a transitional period. How you convert the energy of restoration into the energy of interpretation—

Polland: yes. That's such a good question. yes.

Q: —with your staff, with your institution? Because it's such a shift. And this is a question I'm sure people who are going to use the archives, who are in their process of restorations, whatever they may be. Once they're finished, how do you maintain that energy moving forward in the interpretation of the site? Any thoughts on that?

Polland: yes. I mean, I think goes back to what I said earlier, like that the institution [01:21:00] has to say that that's important and then put money behind it. And then you also have to have people who, both people who always bring in new people who can be rediscovering it, that can kind of be thinking about what to do. But staying so always making sure there's an investment in knowing the history, teaching the history, focusing in. I think the history is so key with historic sites, you know. And that sometimes there is a sense of when they're discovered, of course the

history is there, but then it takes, then you start to have the history, not just of the history, but the history of the preservation of that history.

Q2: Right.

Polland: And then, so then you have to think about how to put all of those together. 'Cause I think people are interested in both.

Q2: Right.

Polland: I think they are. Once they become aware and because you have a building that you can use to signal those different layers, that always helps. I mean, I think people always wanna know at the Tenement Museum, like the meta version of it. You know, like, "Oh, there, that corner, that's what it looked like before it was restored. [01:22:00] Or that's where the wall was, and you can see the ghost of the wall. But we moved the wall." I just think you always have to keep thinking about how to rein—and you need people with an ear, one ear to the history and one ear towards who are the people now, what's going on now, what do they need? Because even the Lower East Side has changed since I've gotten there, in the sense that there were, you know, it's just changed. And the Jewish community has changed.

Q: And it's still changing.

Polland: And it's still changing.

Q: It's becoming very gentrified in a classic way. And it's happening gradually. But you are losing that fabric. I mean, as these new buildings go up.

Polland: Right. And all these like, young people are there. It's so funny 'cause it's just, there are some streets, like right on Canal and East Broadway, these kind of fancy restaurants and all of that. It's kind of, it's crazy. But I think, oh, there was something that I was gonna say, but I forgot.

Q: [01:23:00] It always reminds me, this is a different, it's the same story—same thing, but different geographically. When I was at the old New York Post, and I was writing about neighborhoods that were evolving and turning. It's 1970s, so the city was in pretty bad shape. And things were starting to happen in Flatbush. And I was so excited to see this all happening. Flatbush is where my parents were from.

Polland: Okay.

Q: My father was long gone, but I said to my mother, "Ma, you gotta come see—

Polland: yes, yeah, yeah.

Q: — It's happening in Flatbush." She said, "Flatbush? I spent my life getting out of Flatbush."

Polland: Getting out of Flatbush. [laughs].

Q: And we had that kind of reaction. In the very early days, that first generation of elder Jews who came down—

Polland: Who had made it.

Q: —didn't want to either remember that they came from there [01:24:00] or that anyone came from there. And then the next generation was slightly different. And then the third generation, they wanted to be married there. They wanted their bar mitzvah there.

Polland: But there's that Marcus Hanssen quote from the [19]30s. He was a historian from Wisconsin, but it was studying like he was giving an address to the Scandinavian Association, a Norwegian Association. I can't remember what, but he said, "What the son wishes to forget, the grandson wishes to remember." That there is a way in which this—you have to feel American to then be like, "Wait, where did I come from?" But then the question then becomes, who's there to tell you and what do you remember? And everyone says, right, they wish they would've asked their parents this, their grandparents that.

Q: Well, this is the future challenge.

Polland: yes. yes.

Q: Because as we get further and further away—

Polland: We're already in that challenge.

Q: —we are—which is why internally, [01:25:00] I know on your board, on the Eldridge board, there is this debate of who is Eldridge now. Is this just another site for Jewish history like the Jewish Museum or the JCC? Or is it always to be remembered as unique in terms of what it is and what it tells us? That takes professional dedication. And without the right scholars and staff, you're just not gonna get it.

Polland: You're not gonna resolve that or even, or put those two things in some kind of productive tension to kind of keep it going. But there was. I also just think, well, this last thing, you know, I think there is an opportunity for the Jewish community today, given it's torn apart over Israel, it's torn apart over everything. It's almost, [01:26:00] American Jews should know the rich Amer—not rich in terms of, but like the amazing, history of the Lower East Side and, you know, the coming together of an immigrant story and an American story, that's what's fascinating. Then by knowing that particular story, you're extracting a universal dynamic that applies to everyone. So you don't have to choose between it being a Jewish organization or American organization. The more you know of the particularity of the Jewish story, you're gonna find the dynamics that are gonna transcend. And again, having that amazing space to welcome people in should solve—

Q: And it evolves into the American story, but it still has its roots that should not be ignored.

Polland: Right. Exactly. Amen.

Q: Amen.

Polland: Amen.

Q: I was gonna say, what a perfect ending.

Polland: yes. [laughs]. Perfect.

Q: Right?

Q2: It's a wrap.

Q: It's a wrap.

Polland: Thank you so much.

Q2: Terrific.

[END OF INTERVIEW]