A dozen years ago, I moved from a Park Slope brownstone to a rent-controlled apartment south of Kings Highway in Brooklyn. It turned out to be next door to the Ocean Avenue building where my grandmother, Shirley, had spent her first married years. “Tell me,” she demanded over the phone, her Brooklyn accent undimmed by 20 years in Florida, “is it one of those units with a sunken living room? Those were the hot ticket!”

It was indeed. And as I unpacked my Ikea sofa into that sunken living room—60 years after Shirley snared her own—my family’s Brooklyn story had come full circle.

By any measure, Brooklyn is the most Jewish place in America. Approximately 600,000 Jews now call the borough home, down from an incredible 900,000 in the 1940s. One in four Brooklyn residents is Jewish, the largest proportion by far among New York City’s five boroughs, according to the most recent survey by the UJA-Federation of New York.

“There are more Jews right now in Brooklyn than anywhere else in the world, including the city of Tel Aviv,” said Ron Schweiger, the borough’s official historian, whose Flatlands home is a shrine to the long-vanished Brooklyn Dodgers (the team moved to Los Angeles in 1957).

Scratch the surface of most American Jewish families and you’ll find a Brooklyn connection. At a Passover seder in the Hollywood Hills in 2010, I learned that two fellow diners had been my Park Slope neighbors before we all headed to California for graduate school. When conversation turned to the Dodgers, the grandparents at the table joined in, reminiscing about their Brooklyn childhoods and outings to see the team play at Ebbets Field.

Back in the borough, a one-time bastion of Reform Judaism, Brooklyn is today the worldwide headquarters of numerous Hasidic groups, including the Satmar dynasty and the Chabad-Lubavitch movement, whose members migrated en masse from Europe after the war and stayed through the upheavals of 20th-century urban life.

Now those demographics are shifting again. “Almost every week I get invited to a new, independent minyan that’s launching,” says Jon Leener, an Orthodox rabbi who founded Base BKLYN (basehillel.org/bklyn), a Hillel-sponsored, post-denominational Jewish community in Williamsburg, three years ago to serve north Brooklyn’s growing non-Hasidic Jewish population.

The Most Jewish Spot on Earth
THE JEWS’ HIGHWAY

Jewish history at New York Diner, a professor of American history at the University of Michigan and the Frederick G.L. Huetwell Professor of History at the University of Michigan and author of the new book "Jewish New York: The Remarkable Story of a City and a People," notes Gail Hammerman, a lifelong Brooklynite and former president of Hadassah’s Brooklyn region (hadassah.org/brooklyn). Worshippers can choose from 120 synagogues representing virtually every nuance of modern Jewish practice, from the full Orthodox spectrum to the cultural mosaic of Sephardism. Signs and sidewalk chatter are Yiddish in Williamsburg, Russian in Brighton Beach, Hebrew in parts of Flatbush and Midwood. The manicured lawns and stucco mansions of Gravesend are home to the famously tight-knit Syrian community, an Arabic-speaking outpost of Brooklyn’s Levantine Diaspora. Some shuls have lesbian rabbis, while many are strictly gender-segregated; some are fervently Zionist, others are hostile to the State of Israel. There are grand, historic temples and storefront shitelehs (small, informal congregations). Post-denominational organizations host pop-up Shabbat dinners, interfaith seders and gay singles nights. But Brooklyn’s Jewish diversity goes deeper than that. Orthodox congregations thrive in predominantly liberal neighborhoods, non-denominational minyanim pepper Hasidic bastions, and Sephardi and Ashkenazi cultures mingle in ways you rarely see elsewhere.

A Replace-A-Ghost Street rabbi, liturgical composer Isaac Goldfarb, Rabbi Samuel Weintraub said his Conservative congregation—"the borough’s oldest in continuous operation”—helped establish a Jewish community in north Brooklyn when Lower East Side synagogues migrated north. “One of the crucial characteristics of Brooklyn is that Jews, on an hourly basis, are interacting with people of different backgrounds, different languages,” notes Hasia Diner, the Paul and Sylvia Steinberg Professor of American Jewish History at New York University. “So in Brooklyn, they’d had no choice but to find common ground with the diversity of the world’s people.”

In just the last century, the borough has produced a host of luminaries: Barbra Streisand, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Lou Reed, Wendy Wasserstein, Bernie Sanders, Beverly Sills, Woody Allen and, of course, the Dodgers’ Sandy Koufax.

Nowadays, so many Jewish novelists have Brooklyn ties—Jonah’s Sarfan Ezer and Paul Auster are among the best known—that Boris Fishman, the Russian-born, Brooklyn-breeder author of A Replace-A-Ghost, jumped to Brooklyn Magazine last year that he was moving back to the borough in the name of authenticity. In Brooklyn Heights, the Kane Street Synagogue recently celebrated the bar mitzvah centennial of its member Aaron Copland, the composer whose decision to pursue music was influenced by his Kane Street rabbi, liturgical composer Isaac Goldfarb. Rabbi Samuel Weintraub said his Conservative congregation—“the borough’s oldest in continuous operation”—helped establish a Jewish community in north Brooklyn when Lower East Side synagogues migrated north.

In recent years, Brooklyn has become a global byword for urban hipness. The phenomenon arguably started in the late 1990s, when real estate prices began their vertiginous climb, and young people priced out of Manhattan moved across the East River seeking cheaper rents. Soon those gentrified quarters—the “Brownstone Brooklyn” districts of Park Slope, Carroll Gardens, Boerum Hill and Brooklyn Heights, along with the riverfront areas around Williamsburg—became destinations in their own right. A new generation of artists and professionals, many Jewish, rediscovered the borough’s tree-lined charm and historic grandeur (and priced out others in the process, a topic of particular concern among lower-income Hasidic communities).

“People used to move here because it’s cheaper than Manhattan, but now they see living in Brooklyn as an expression of who they are,” observes Leener, adding that Brooklyn feels freer and less traditional bound to young creative types. “In a Jewish sense, people want their Jewish community to be reflective of their other values, their identity.” Janna Pelle is one such artist. Wearing cherry-red lipstick, the Miami native belts out klezmer-inflected pop at venues like the Bitter End in Manhattan, but she never considered actually living there. “I just wanted to live in Brooklyn,” says Pelle, 27, who is also a freelance social media guru. By day, Pelle wields a keyboard in a brick warehouse by the Gowanus Canal, teaching music at the School of Rock in an area whose post-industrial spaces now attract musicians. For an artist and a Jew, Pelle explains, “Brooklyn just feels more like a neighborhood.”

ORGANIC, THE STORY BROOKLYN Began in 1654, when Asher Levy, a Sephardi Jew from Recife, Brazil, was among the first Jews to arrive in New York City. Levy was also the first member of the tribe to invest in property in Brooklyn, setting in motion two trends that have reached a zenith in 2018: Brooklyn real estate madness (in trendy neighborhoods, seven-figure home prices are routine) and Jewish community. A century before Generation X rediscovered Kings County in the early 2000s, the original Brooklyn Jewish migration was spurred by the 1903 opening of the Williamsburg Bridge, which connected the Lower East Side with Brooklyn. “People used to refer to it as ‘the Jews’ highway,” says Hasia Diner, a professor of American Jewish history at New York University. “The locus of Jewish former president of Hadassah’s Brooklyn region (hadassah.org/brooklyn). Worshippers can choose from 120 synagogues representing virtually every nuance of modern Jewish practice, from the full Orthodox spectrum to the cultural mosaic of Sephardism. Signs and sidewalk chatter are Yiddish in Williamsburg, Russian in Brighton Beach, Hebrew in parts of Flatbush and Midwood. The manicured lawns and stucco mansions of Gravesend are home to the famously tight-knit Syrian community, an Arabic-speaking outpost of Brooklyn’s Levantine Diaspora. Some shuls have lesbian rabbis, while many are strictly gender-segregated; some are fervently Zionist, others are hostile to the State of Israel. There are grand, historic temples and storefront shitelehs (small, informal congregations). Post-denominational organizations host pop-up Shabbat dinners, interfaith seders and gay singles nights. But Brooklyn’s Jewish diversity goes deeper than that. Orthodox congregations thrive in predominantly liberal neighborhoods, non-denominational minyanim pepper Hasidic bastions, and Sephardi and Ashkenazi cultures mingle in ways you rarely see elsewhere.

IF YOU BUILD IT... JEWISH New Flavor Alex and Zach Franek (above) are bringing Upper West Side appetizing to Greenpoint; musician Janna Pelle; Rabbi Jon Leener of Base BKLYN

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Longtime observers say that as New York City has grown safer and more diverse, the barriers that divided Brooklyn for decades have largely dissolved. “You have emerging Jewish communities throughout the whole borough, which you didn’t have in the past,” observes Hammerman, Hadassah’s current national secretary. Even a decade ago, you wouldn’t have seen Jewish foodies lining up for matzah ball soup in Greenpoint, where Frankel’s Delicatessen (frankelsdelicatessen.com; non-kosher) opened last year. But in a district better known for its Polish kielbasa, brothers Zach and Alex Frankel—30-something transplants from the Upper West Side—decided it was Greenpoint’s moment for the kind of nostalgic Jewish noshes they grew up with at Barney Greengrass and Zabar’s. “Year after year, we found ourselves having the same conversation about there being no good delicatessens in our neighborhood, as we made the trek into the city for pastrami,” reflects Zach. “We just built our own.”

Another Jewish evolution is happening in Crown Heights, where elegant rowhouses are attracting priced-out Park Slopers. As liberal Jews move into an area once split between Chabad and black families with Caribbean roots, longstanding boundaries are blurring. Kosher fusion restaurants now flourish on both sides of Eastern Parkway. “There’s a real young, entrepreneurial spirit here,” says Baila Olidort, a longtime Crown Heights resident who covers Chabad’s global activities as editor of its newspaper, Lubavitch International. “There’s really nothing insular about this community. You’re going to hear different languages, meet people from all walks of life.”

Along the Atlantic Ocean in Brighton Beach, you still hear mostly Russian on the boardwalk. Soviet-born Jews began settling here in the 1940s; many more arrived from the 1970s through the 1990s. The Russian Jews were largely secular, and until recently, there was scarce evidence of Jewish life in so-called Little Odessa.

But today, an oversized hanukkiah is prominent amid the tangle of Old World delis and bakeries under the EL Synagogues are introducing young Russian Americans to the heritage they never knew, “and there’s a lot more Jewish life here than even 10 years ago,” says Rabbi Mordechai Tokarsky, the Soviet-born leader of the Jewish Center of Brighton Beach and a galvanizer of Russian Jewish outreach. The younger generation switches comfortably between Russian and English—a metaphor of sorts, I thought recently, as my family brunched amid a polyglot crowd at the Masal Café in Sheepshead Bay. In its mid-century heyday, the canalside Landy’s clam house—now the Masal building—was reportedly America’s largest restaurant. Today, the Turkish eatery is filled with families wearing Stars of David and munching on feta salad and hummus.

My own Russian Jewish grandparents happily bid adieu to Brooklyn, but in a taxi later that day, it became clear that their immigrant spirit is alive in the borough. My Jewish driver from St. Petersburg, Evgeny, told me how his America-bound family had spent a sojourn in Italy, and together we waxed rhapsodic about that country’s scenery and food. “So if you loved Italy so much, why did you come here?” I asked him, finally. He looked at me like I’d just asked him whether the world was flat. “Are you kidding me?” he chortled in a thick Russian accent. “There’s no place like this. Fuhgeddaboutid.”

In truth, there never was a more Brooklyn sentiment.

Hilary Danailova was the third generation of her family to live in Brooklyn. Although the now lives in Philadelphia, she can often be found indoctrinating the fourth—her daughter, Zela—in the rites of Park Slope and the sea at Brighton Beach.

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