

NMAJH Project 'Re:collects' Jewish Memories, Stories, Histories

By **Rachel Kurland** - September 20, 2017

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Re:collection officially launched Sept. 14. | Photos provided by the National Museum of American Jewish History

They occupy just about every shelf in a Jewish home: tattered old photographs, postcards, letters, kiddush cups and menorahs passed down from generations.

Embedded in these objects are individual family histories, and there's a greater use for them than collecting dust.

Instead, the National Museum of American Jewish History wants to collect these stories through its new interactive online and mobile site, Re:collection.

In collaboration with Enwoven, Re:collection gives Jewish Americans across the country a chance to upload multimedia depicting their personal family histories to the site, allowing users and historians to collect, preserve and share stories illustrating the American Jewish landscape.

Josh Perelman, NMAJH chief curator and director of exhibitions and collections, said the site — recollection.nmajh.org — is a form of rapid-format storytelling.

The project was an inspiration from the late Ira Saligman — a longtime NMAJH board of trustees member — who envisioned taking the model of the “It’s Your Story” story booth inside the museum and making it possible for individuals and families to share their family stories and memories, and connect with one another online.

“Not only would this empower the museum to expand its national footprint, but serve our mission in the ongoing collection of the stories of American Jewish life,” Perelman said. “So that which is the present today is history tomorrow.”

The free site is simple to get started, and there are several ways to participate.

While some might be hesitant to add to the project because they think it’s too complicated or daunting, Perelman said it’s easy to collaborate with others.

“All it takes is one photo, one video, one audio file, and immediately you are a part of Re:collection,” he said. “There are people who want to leave their memories as part of a larger, communal project.”

Users can pick varying privacy levels to choose who can view your content.

Similar to social media, the site filters public content through user-generated tags. Site-goers can also push or pull content that is already on their personal social media accounts to the site, and vice versa, as well as “like,” comment and “follow” content or projects.

Once multimedia files are posted, users can expand on them by adding text, oral histories or interviews. The stories can be viewed chronologically, along a timeline or pinpointed on a world map.

To ease into it, users can upload specific content under two themes now underway: immigration and foodways.

The world is their oyster — “kosher oyster?” Perelman laughed — regardless, the opportunity is broad.

“This is an opportunity for all of our potential users to leave the gem of a story among other gems that will illuminate the meaning of those two subjects within the larger context of the American Jewish community today,” he said.

As a whole, the website is reminiscent of a melding of pieces of Ancestry.com and Instagram.



“A family tree is a quantitative portrait of a family’s history. So you know who the people are, you know when they lived and died, and many times you know where they lived, but a family tree doesn’t give you the story behind all the branches of the tree,” Perelman explained.

Re:collection integrates those social media features but on the foundation of historical genealogy.

The project officially launched Sept. 14. Of those who got a preview, Perelman said the museum received about a 45 percent response rate to a preview email encouraging people to explore the site.

Museumgoers can also explore Re:collection at a kiosk on the second floor.

“The stories that are being uploaded — the images, the memories — become part of the digital collection of the museum and will be preserved in the same way that we preserve historical culture or artifacts,” he said.

As the stories accumulate, Perelman hopes to use them as inspiration for future content in the museum’s core exhibitions.

“The more connectivity that we as an institution can help be a part in facilitating, the more rich and the more vibrant the story of our community will be in the present and for future historians,” he added.

Perelman noted that knowing one’s history impacts overall family happiness and cohesiveness.

“Being American Jews, that heritage component is that connection to the thousands of years of tradition that preceded this moment,” he said. “In telling our stories today and exploring the nature of being a Jew in the United States at this moment, we are continuing the ongoing tradition of storytelling within Judaism.”

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