

# An abandoned 19th century Jewish mural finds a new home

81-year-old Dedham woman fulfills mission to salvage historic art

By [Mark Shanahan](#) Globe Staff, Updated November 29, 2024, 5:54 a.m.



Carol Clingan and Davd Towler watched as a crew removed a 19th-century mural from the attic of an apartment building in North Adams Oct. 30. The building used to be a meeting place for a congregation of Lithuanian Jews. Clingan identified the mural and helped raise money to remove it from the property and relocate it to the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst. MATTHEW CAVANAUGH/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

**C**arol Clingan is obsessive, and that can be a mixed blessing. On the one hand, she can't resist the impulse to collect vintage cookie and cracker tins — thousands of them — which are impressively arranged on shelves

throughout her Dedham condo.

“My husband doesn’t like them and the kids hate them,” Clingan says with a sigh.

“They’re going to call 1-800-JUNK if I don’t find something to do with them.”

But there’s an upside to her single-mindedness, too. For a decade, Clingan has devoted herself to the recovery and relocation of a century-old mural languishing in the attic of a North Adams apartment building. Motivated by an intense interest in all things Jewish, Clingan was determined to save the mural, which had been commissioned in the 1890s by a congregation of Berkshires-based Lithuanian Jewish immigrants and then abandoned.



Corrine Long and Gianfranco Pocobene prepare the surface of the fragile 19th-century mural to be packed up and taken out of the former synagogue in North Adams. BEN BARNHART

“She’s a force to be reckoned with,” says David Towler, who first mentioned the mural’s existence to Clingan in 2015. “Carol made this whole thing happen.”

It took a while, though, because Clingan had to enlist a team of experts and raise nearly a half-million dollars by herself. Yet the fragile artwork was finally rescued and, earlier this month, it was installed at the [Yiddish Book Center](#), the Amherst nonprofit dedicated to preserving and celebrating Yiddish books and culture.

“I’m beside myself,” Clingan said. “I can hardly believe it.”



Carol Clingan and David Towler posed for a photo as a crew moved the 19th-century mural into a truck in North Adams. MATTHEW CAVANAUGH/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

It wouldn't be accurate to describe Clingan as retired. At 81, she's always up to something, often related to her synagogue, Temple Beth Elohim in Wellesley, or the infinite rabbit hole known as genealogy, which became one of her compulsions after watching “Roots,” the 1977 TV [miniseries](#) based on author Alex Haley's book exploring his family history. (Clingan is now on the board of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Greater Boston.)

Her first major genealogical endeavor was ascertaining her own origin story, beginning with both sets of Russian grandparents, whom she'd always felt connected to but didn't know much about.

"I knew my father's mother was one of 12 children and I just said to myself, 'I'm going to find out who all those 12 children were,'" Clingan said. "It was a very meaty project."

Meatier still when you consider she embarked on the research in the pre-internet '80s. But Clingan was steadfast; she tracked down birth certificates and marriage licenses, and even hired a man in Minsk to do legwork there. ("I'm chicken," she said of her decision not to travel to her ancestral homeland. "My husband says Russia is where you left, not where you go.")

Eventually, Clingan was able to locate all 44 of her father's first cousins and organized a reunion attended by 180 people in Burlington, Vt., where her father, Isadore Isenberg, was born. Her dad, then in his 80s, appreciated the party.

"It was such a gift to him," Clingan says proudly.



A former synagogue on Francis Street in North Adams, circa 1900. It was later turned into an apartment building, where a century-old mural was discovered. The artwork has been moved to the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst. YIDDISH BOOK CENTER

She learned about the mural while working on a genealogical project of a different sort: She was asked to compile an index of Massachusetts synagogues, past and present, and then gather photographs of their yahrzeit plaques, the memorial nameplates displayed on temple walls.

To get information about the Lithuanian Jewish congregation in Berkshire County, Clingan called Towler, who's a North Adams native and the unofficial historian of the city's Jewish population. He told Clingan the congregation formed in the 1890s, but left its Francis Street synagogue for a larger space in 1920.

“He says to me there’s this mural he’s been suffering over,” Clingan said. “It turns out when the congregation moved, they left the mural behind.”



Left to right: David Towler, Charles Swabey, and Carol Clingan stand in the attic of an apartment building in North Adams — where a 19th-century mural was discovered — on Oct. 30. MATTHEW CAVANAUGH/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

She drove out to see the wall art and was horrified to find it stranded in a dark, empty space on the top floor of the former synagogue, which had been converted to apartments years ago. Clingan wasn’t sure what to do, but knew about another [mural that was rescued](#) from a former synagogue in Vermont in 2015, so she figured reclamation was at least possible.

The North Adams mural, measuring 25-foot-wide and 5-foot-tall, was painted by Noah Levin, a Lithuanian artist brought to America by the congregation. Done in a pastel-like crayon, the piece, weighing nearly 2,000 pounds, depicts Jewish symbols, Hebrew text, and two American flags representing the immigrants’ enthusiasm for their new home.

One of Clingan's first calls was to Judith Cannon, who had been a project manager for many years before taking an administrative job at Clingan's synagogue. Clingan asked if she'd assemble a team to figure out how to extricate the art without damaging it.



Corrine Long prepares the surface of the fragile 19th-century mural to be packed up and taken out of the former synagogue in North Adams. BEN BARNHART

“I didn’t know anything about saving murals, but I do know about hiring professionals,” said Cannon. “I’m also Jewish. I grew up with Yiddish-speaking parents and grandparents. The world this entered me into was important to me on an emotional level.”

Clingan committed to saving the mural without knowing where it would go, or if anyone even wanted it. “And I didn’t have any idea who to ask,” she said. Ultimately, the Yiddish Book Center agreed to take it, but with the caveat that Clingan raise all the money. “It’s very compelling,” said Susan Bronson, executive director of the center, whose [focus](#) is

primarily the recovery and preservation of Yiddish literature. “But it’s not really at the center of our mission.”



Workers install the large mural near the entrance of the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

Clingan needed to come up with \$450,000 to conserve and stabilize the mural; design the custom crib that would be its shipping container; hire a crane to hoist it through a large hole cut in the building’s facade; and fashion a special frame for the installation at the Yiddish Book Center.

“I’d never fundraised,” Clingan said. “And, believe me, I hated every moment.”

It wasn’t easy. People helped her create a glossy handout that she passed around at her synagogue. She also had the names of 70 men who signed the 1906 charter of the North Adams congregation and, using her skills as a genealogist, Clingan tracked down their descendants and hit them up for donations. But after all that, she only managed to raise about \$50,000.



Then she had an idea.

“I take an online Talmud class on Friday mornings and there was a guy in the class who sprinkles in Yiddish,” said Clingan. “I love Yiddish! I went to see him and he was absolutely captivated by the mural.”

Sheldon Buckler is a former research scientist and senior executive at [Polaroid](#) who, it turns out, shares Clingan’s exuberance for Jewish culture. Now in his 90s, Buckler was so impressed with Clingan’s persistence that he made a substantial contribution to her cause. (Neither Buckler nor Clingan will say how much money he donated.)



A crew removes a 19th-century mural from the attic of an apartment building in North Adams Oct. 30. MATTHEW CAVANAUGH/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

“I grew up in the southeast Bronx and when I was a boy, Eleanor Roosevelt came to our neighborhood and welcomed us. People cried and hollered in Yiddish,” Buckler said in a phone interview. “This beautiful item is an expression of what coming to America meant to the Jewish people of Eastern Europe.”

With Buckler's donation in hand, Clingan was able to raise the balance and, on a sunny October afternoon with neighbors and passersby watching, the mural was at last liberated from the dreary attic on Francis Street. As the crane lowered the artwork into the back of a box truck, Clingan, wearing red Crocs and carrying a purse, stood on a hillside with Cannon, her project manager.

"It's like the birth of a baby or a NASA landing," Cannon said.

For her part, Clingan said she's relieved that her perseverance paid off and a cultural artifact discarded all those years ago is finally safe and on display at the Yiddish Book Center. She's also looking forward to resuming her search for a specific [Byrd's](#) cookie tin she needs to complete a set.

"I look for it on eBay every day. It's a red tin with poppies on it. It's a chocolate mint cookie," Clingan said. "I'll turn myself inside out until I find it."



Carol Clingan hugs project manager Judy Cannon as a crew removes a 19th-century mural from the attic of an apartment building in North Adams Oct. 30. MATTHEW CAVANAUGH/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

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