

TEACHER'S GUIDE

Document Based Activity

Part 4: Factory Girls

MISSION 4: "City of Immigrants"

Factory Life

With the growth of New York's garment industry at the turn of the twentieth century, many immigrants found work in the city's sweatshops. Like Lena, immigrants might have worked in both tenement sweatshops and the larger factories. Large garment factories grew in the early 1900s as a result of technological advances including the electric sewing machine and the subway system. Sweatshops and many factories worked under a contractor system model, in which individual contractors received components of garments that they in turn assembled according to manufacturer designs. These finished products were then returned to the manufacturers, who paid a set price per finished garment. Consequently, contractors, in order to make any profits, forced longer hours and lower wages on their workers. Many young immigrant women preferred to work in the more established factories that offered greater job stability, often higher wages, and a larger community of young women workers. In this activity, students examine primary sources exploring the experiences of garment factory workers.

A NOTE TO THE EDUCATOR

While Lena's journey to America is fictional, her story is based upon the actual experience that millions of immigrants went through at the turn of the twentieth century. The primary source documents included in this activity complement Lena's story and will introduce your students to historic records exploring the garment industry. Each primary source highlights an aspect of the experience of sweatshop work. Information about each source and guiding questions are also included to support student exploration of each document.

Activity Components

- *About the Documents: Information about each source to help you prepare to use it in the classroom*
- *Guiding Questions: Prompts to support student exploration of each document.*
- *Primary Sources:*
 - *Document 1: "Life in the Shop" by Clara Lemlich*
 - *Document 2: "Days and Dreams" by Sadie Frowne*
 - *Document 3: Photographs of Sweatshops*
 - *Document 4: "The Sweatshop" poem by Morris Rosenfeld*
- *Organizer to record primary source investigations.*
- *Culminating Activity to help students connect the documents to gain a deeper insight on what it meant to be a garment shop worker.*

This activity is designed for you to determine how many components you use with your students. The following procedure is recommended and can be adapted based on your curricular goals and timing constraints.



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Steps to Complete

The following procedure is recommended for this activity and can be adapted based on your curricular goals and timing constraints.

- 1. Distribute primary source document(s) to students.*
- 2. Have students work independently or in small groups to investigate the document(s) with the goal of learning as much as they can about the experiences of garment factory workers. Students can record their findings in the included organizer.*
- 3. Select guiding questions to help your students investigate each source. You can give your students all of the guiding questions, or choose a few to which they can respond.*
- 4. Have students present their findings to the class or a fellow student and share what was learned.*
- 5. Assign students to use the information they uncovered from the primary source document(s) to write a "day in the life" essay detailing what it is like to be a garment factory worker at the turn of the twentieth century. Students should incorporate aspects of all the documents investigated within their essay in order to accurately describe the factory worker's schedule, feelings, and activities during a given day.*



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About the Documents

Document 1: "Life in the Shop" by Clara Lemlich

Clara Lemlich was born to a Jewish family in the Ukrainian village of Gorodok in 1886. She immigrated with her family to the United States in 1903, and became an important figure in the fight for reform of New York City's garment industry. She famously called a strike and a walkout of shirtwaist makers in 1909. In this testimonial, Clara describes garment factory conditions.

Document 2: "Days and Dreams" by Sadie Frowne

Sadie Frowne arrived in America with her mother at the age of thirteen. Her mother died shortly after, and Sadie went to work in a sweatshop to support herself. This excerpt from an interview she conducted for *The Independent* magazine in 1902 describes her life as a garment worker, and gives insight into the experiences of immigrant teenage girls in America at the turn of the twentieth century. Like many young women, Sadie worked hard, budgeted, and enjoyed the amusements the city offered.

Document 3: Photographs of Sweatshops

Photographers and reporters in the early twentieth century used cameras as tools for social reform. Photographs became instrumental in changing the child labor laws in the United States. The photographs included here depict typical factory sweatshops in New York City.

Document 4: "The Sweatshop," poem by Morris Rosenfeld

Morris Rosenfeld was born in 1862 in Russian Poland, and ultimately immigrated to New York City. Rosenfeld wrote poetry based on his experience as a garment worker, and became one of the famous Yiddish "sweatshop poets." This poem documents the harsh conditions of working in a garment shop, most notably the feeling of losing one's self and becoming a machine.



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Guiding Questions

Document 1: "Life in the Shop" by Clara Lemlich

- Read the account. What information does it provide about working in a garment shop?
- Describe the daily schedule of a factory worker.
- What might motivate an immigrant to work at a garment factory?
- What are the pros and cons of working in a garment factory?
- What is the difference between salary work and piecework?
- What might make the girls feel like machines? What might make them feel human?
- What questions does this document raise for you?
- In what ways can this document inform our understanding of Lena's experience in America?

Document 2: "Days and Dreams" by Sadie Frowne

- Read the account. What information does it provide about working in a garment shop?
- Describe the daily schedule of a factory worker.
- What might motivate an immigrant to work in a garment factory?
- What are the pros and cons of working in a garment factory?
- How does Sadie spend her earnings? Do you agree with her choices? Why or why not?
- What might make the girls feel like machines? What might make them feel human?
- What questions does this document raise for you?
- In what ways can this document inform our understanding of Lena's experience in America?

Document 3: Photographs of Sweatshops

- What do these images tell us about the garment factory?
- Compare and contrast the two images. What is similar about the two factories and what is different?
- Describe the people working in the factory. What can we learn about them from the image (age, gender, etc.)?
- If you could "enter" the photograph, what might you hear, see, and smell in the factory?
- Based on the image, how would you describe a garment factory to somebody who had never visited?
- What questions does this document raise for you?
- In what ways can this document inform our understanding of Lena's experience in America?

Document 4: "The Sweatshop," poem by Morris Rosenfeld

- Read the poem. What information does it provide?
 - How would you describe the physical experience of working in a garment shop?
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- How would you describe the emotional experience of working in a garment factory?
- What does the clock symbolize?
- What might make the worker feel like a machine? What might make them feel human?
- What questions does this document raise for you?
- In what ways can this document inform our understanding of Lena's experience in America?



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Factory Life

Perspective on Factory life

Use the organizer to record your findings about the experience of being a factory worker.

What is it like to be a garment worker?

What is it like to work in a factory?

What does a factory worker earn? How is this money spent?



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Factory Life

Document 1: "Life in the Shop" by Clara Lemlich

Source: Leon Stein, ed., Out of the Sweatshop: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy (New York: Quadrangle/New Times Book Company, 1977)

http://trianglefire.ilr.cornell.edu/primary/testimonials/ootss_ClaraLemlich.html?sto_sec=sweatshops

First let me tell you something about the way we work and what we are paid. There are two kinds of work - regular, that is salary work, and piecework. The regular work pays about \$6 a week and the girls have to be at their machines at 7 o'clock in the morning and they stay at them until 8 o'clock at night, with just one-half hour for lunch in that time.

The shops. Well, there is just one row of machines that the daylight ever gets to - that is the front row, nearest the window. The girls at all the other rows of machines back in the shops have to work by gaslight, by day as well as by night. Oh, yes, the shops keep the work going at night, too.

The bosses in the shops are hardly what you would call educated men, and the girls to them are part of the machines they are running. They yell at the girls and they "call them down" even worse than I imagine the Negro slaves were in the South.

There are no dressing rooms for the girls in the shops. They have to hang up their hats and coats - such as they are - on hooks along the walls. Sometimes a girl has a new hat. It never is much to look at because it never costs more than 50 cents. That means that we have gone for weeks on two-cent lunches - dry cake and nothing else.

The shops are unsanitary - that's the word that is generally used, but there ought to be a worse one used. Whenever we tear or damage any of the goods we sew on, or whenever it is found damaged after we are through with it, whether we have done it or not, we are charged for the piece and sometimes for a whole yard of the material.

At the beginning of every slow season, \$2 is deducted from our salaries. We have never been able to find out what this is for.



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Document 2: "Days and Dreams" by Sadie Frowne

Source: Beth S. Wenger. The Jewish Americans. (New York: Doubleday, 2007), pp. 147-149).

I get up at half-past five o'clock every morning and make myself a cup of coffee on the oil stove. I eat a bit of bread and perhaps some fruit and then go to work. Often I get there soon after six o'clock so as to be in good time, though the factory does not open till seven...

At seven o'clock we all sit down to our machines and the boss brings to each one the pile of work that he or she is to finish during the day--what they call in English their "stint." This pile is put down beside the machine and as soon as a skirt is done it is laid on the other side of the machine. Sometimes the work is not all finished by six o'clock, and then the one who is behind must work overtime...

The machines go like mad all day because the faster you work the more money you get. Sometimes in my haste I get my finger caught and the needle goes right through it. It goes so quick, though, that it does not hurt much. I bind the finger up with a piece of cotton and go on working. We all have accidents like that...

All the time we are working the boss walks around examining the finished garments and making us do them over again, if they are not just right. So we have to be careful as well as swift. But I am getting so good at the work that within a year I will be making \$7 a week, and then I can save at least \$3.50 a week. I have over \$200 saved now.

The machines are all run by foot-power, and at the end of the day one feels so weak that there is a great temptation to lie right down and sleep. But you must go out and get air, and have some pleasure. So instead of lying down I go out, generally with Henry. Sometimes we go to Coney Island, where there are good dancing places, and sometimes we go to Ulmer Park to picnics. I am very fond of dancing and, in fact, all sorts of pleasure. I go to the theatre quite often, and like those plays that make you cry a great deal. "The Two Orphans" is good. The last time I saw it I cried all night because of the hard times that the children had in the play...

I am going back to night school again this winter. Plenty of my friends go there. Some of the women in my class are more than forty years of age. Like me, they did not have a chance to learn anything in the old country. It is good to have an education; it makes you feel higher...

Some of the women blame me very much because I spend so much money on clothes. They say that instead of a dollar a week I ought not to spend more than twenty-five cents a week on clothes, and that I should save the rest. But a girl must have clothes if she is to go into high society at Ulmer Park or Coney



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Island or the theatre. Those who blame me are the old country people who have old-fashioned notions, but the people who have been here a long time know better. A girl who does not dress well is stuck in a corner, even if she is pretty and Aunt Fanny says that I do just right to put on plenty of style.

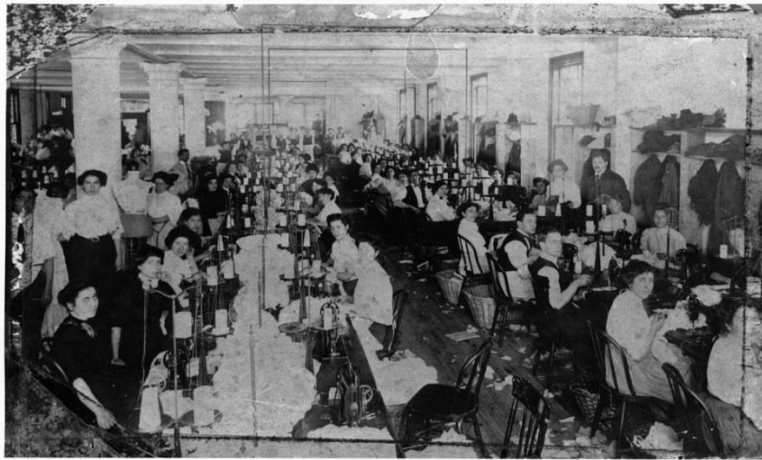


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Document 3: Photographs of Sweatshops

These images depict New York City sweatshops. Photographers and reporters used cameras to document the conditions of people's work and the need for reform. These images depicts typical garment factories.



Interior of a garment factory c. 1910

Source: ILGWU Archives, Kheel Center, Cornell University



Garment Workers/Sweatshop. Lewis Hine ca. 1930

Source: http://www.geh.org/ar/strip10/htmlsrc/m198501270005_ful.html

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Document 4: "The Sweatshop," poem by Morris Rosenfeld

Source:<http://blogs.forward.com/the-arty-semite/135013/morris-rosenfelds-sweatshop-songs/#ixzz3MqE1MfO9>

*The machines are so wildly noisy in the shop
That I often forget who I am.
I get lost in the frightful tumult —
My self is destroyed, I become a machine.
I work and work and work endlessly —
I create and create and create
Why? For whom? I don't know and I don't ask.
What business has a machine thinking?
I have no feelings, no thoughts, no understanding.
The bitter, bloody work suppresses
The noblest, most beautiful, best, richest,
Deepest, and highest things that life possesses.
Seconds, minutes, and hours go by — the days and
nights sail past quickly.
I run the machine as if I wanted to overtake them —
I race mindlessly, endlessly.
The clock in the shop never rests —
It shows everything, strikes constantly, wakes us
constantly.
Someone once explained it to me:
"In its showing and waking lies understanding."
But I seem to remember something, as if from a dream:
The clock awakens life and understanding in me,
And something else — I forget what. Don't ask!
I don't know, I don't know! I'm a machine!*

*At times, when I hear the clock,
I understand its showing and its language quite
differently;
It seems to me that the pendulum urges me:
"Work, work, work a lot!"
I hear in its tones only the boss's anger, his dark look.
The clock, it seems to me, drives me,
Gnashes its teeth, calls me "machine," and yells at me:
"Go!"
But when the wild tumult dies down
And the boss goes away for his lunch hour,
Dawn begins to break in my mind
And things tug at my heart.
Then I feel my wound,
And bitter, burning tears
Soak my meager lunch, my bread.
I feel choked up and I can't eat any more — I can't!
Oh, frightful toil! Oh, bitter poverty!
The human being that is sleeping within me
begins to awake —
the slave that is awake in me
seems to fall asleep.
Now the right hour has struck!
An end to loneliness — let there be an end to it!
But suddenly the whistle, the "boss," sounds an alarm!
I lose my mind, I forget who I am.
There's tumult and struggling — my self is lost.
I don't know, I don't care — I am a machine!*

