Preface

What’s the Use of History?

Ruth J. Abram
President, Lower East Side Tenement Museum

Partly because I spend a large portion of my time asking people to give money to support the work of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, I have given considerable thought to the question: What’s the use of history? I’m painfully aware that many prospective donors have had perfectly dreadful experiences with history—usually in some high school history class. For these students and their teachers, history remains a chronology of places, persons, and dates devoid of any meaning for their lives. During one memorable solicitation, the moment I entered the philanthropist’s office he bellowed, “I hate history. It’s all about the past. It’s dusty. Why would anybody support it?” It seemed not to have occurred to this man that the autobiography he had recently published was, in fact, a history. That history, presumably, he found interesting.

At the Tenement Museum, where we have worked to interpret the history of immigrant families in compelling ways that draw connections between historical and contemporary issues, we meet many Americans who have nothing good to say about the kind of history they took (and hated) in school. Yet they stand uncomplainingly in long lines to get into the Museum. Whether they are purchasing a historical novel or biography or viewing a historical film or engaging in a family genealogy project or visiting a historic site, it is history Americans are after. And why not? Without history, it is difficult to answer the age-old questions: Who am
I, and what am I doing here? Without history, the historian Arthur Bestor once said, “We do not know who we are.” Nor do we know where we are going, or what steps to take to get there. The work of history museums and scholars is to make history available in such a way that it can be used by the public to live more consciously and effectively.

Years in the making and owing so much to the incredible persistence of its editor, Daniel Soyer, *Coat of Many Colors* provides numerous examples of just how crucial history is to understanding our present predicament—within and outside of the garment industry. Here are a few examples:

*Things don't just happen.* *Coat of Many Colors* makes clear that neither the fact that New York City was once the largest manufacturer of clothes in the nation nor the fact that it is no longer dominant in this industry is a fluke. Rather, this change is the result of specific events and influences in the world.

What, you might ask, is the benefit of knowing this? Well, if you are considering investing in this industry, knowing its history and the factors that have made it prosper and/or collapse could help you decide whether or not to invest. If you are in a business which is dependent on the garment industry for its own success, you will want to understand that industry before your business is buffeted by outside influences.

If you work in a garment factory, you will benefit from knowing what factors are likely to control your fate. You will also want to know that at certain times, when the industry abused its workers, those workers united to great effect. Perhaps you’re a union organizer. This volume addresses your twofold challenge: how to grow the union, and at the same time find a way to reform the industry in such a way that your members will flourish and see value in continued union membership.

Perhaps you feel your relationship to the garment industry is more tenuous. You’re a student who wears clothes. You’ve seen the advertisements asking you to “Look for the Union Label.” You’ve heard campus organizers exhorting you to “Buy American.” But is that really the answer? Is the fact that you buy items made in Hong Kong, Ecuador, or the Dominican Republic the primary problem?

Investor, contractor, worker, union organizer, reformer, consumer, or student, this volume will help you understand the garment industry and your relationship to it. But there are so many other lessons as well.
Middle- and upper-class arguments and concerns, though not necessarily the same as those of the working class, may nevertheless be important to articulate in order to build support for reform among people in the power structure.

Two examples from this volume come to mind. In their effort to end piecework in tenement apartments, middle- and upper-class women in the Consumer League argued that the substandard conditions in which these garments were made contributed to the spread of tuberculosis, because the disease remained on the garments as they moved uptown and infected the ladies who bought and wore them. Although science later discovered that TB could not survive the trip, the argument was powerful in its time. So too was the argument that women who worked in tenement shops risked undermining women’s role in society and compromised their virtue. Had they asked Italian female workers, the reformers would have discovered that immigrant women felt that working at home actually preserved their role. But the argument wasn’t meant to persuade workers, but rather middle-class public opinion makers. In a world in which “respectable” middle-class women did not work for pay, the argument won the day. The editor of this volume, Daniel Soyer, points out that the issue persists to this day. When negotiating to get a photograph taken of a contemporary garment shop, he was told that some union members resent being depicted as victims “in need of rescuing by reformers.”

Tragedies can be effectively used to symbolize the urgency and rightness of a cause and galvanize support.

Although labor reforms had been won before 1911, the movement was given a great boost by the terrible Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, in which 146 workers, mostly young women, were killed. None of the reformers’ efforts to draw attention to the issue of workplace abuse could ever have galvanized public opinion in the way the pictures of young women jumping from the flames to their death did.

Leaders who identify with a specific racial or religious group have not always proved to be the best advocates for the rank and file of a different group. Similarly, women workers have discovered that they cannot assume that their concerns will be addressed simply because the men in charge are progressive.

Many factors that may seem tangential can in fact influence an industry. In this volume, we watch as highways made it possible and profitable to move manufacturing outside New York City to areas with depressed wages. Then, too, when the growing informality of dress made skilled
sewers or quick turnaround no longer a necessity, New York's skilled and more highly paid workers and nearby factories were transformed from advantages to liabilities.

Unions have been strongest when they have solidified their relationship to their workers by providing services such as housing, recreation, culture, and education. Progressive organizations that refuse to change when faced with new workers and new needs risk becoming irrelevant. In this volume, we see a union discovering that it had to respond to the demand for day care by Chinese garment workers or face a mass defection.

Timing can make all the difference. For instance, Chinese and Dominicans were able to enter the garment industry because they came at a time when older generations of Jews and Italians were dying or retiring and Puerto Ricans and African Americans, having despaired of any chance of advancement, had moved to other lines of work.

Readers of Coat of Many Colors are in store for a fascinating journey through the garment industry past and present. Beyond that, they will discover a cornucopia of ideas and insights they can use to be more effective citizens of the world. The Lower East Side Tenement Museum is proud to have had a hand in bringing this book to the public.