

# LOWER EAST SIDE TENEMENT MUSEUM

**MUSEUM OFFICES** 91 Orchard Street, New York, NY 10002 ▪ *tel* 212.431.0233 *fax* 212.431.0402 ▪ [www.tenement.org](http://www.tenement.org)  
**MUSEUM LOCATION** 90 Orchard Street

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### **First Permanent Sweatshop Exhibit in the U.S. Opens at the Tenement Museum: The Levine Family Home & Garment Shop**

New York, NY, January 28, 2002 — On February 5th of this year, the Museum will open its fifth restored apartment, that of Harris and Jenny Levine, Polish immigrants who operated a dress shop out of their home. This new apartment will join the Museum's previously restored apartments: the Gumpertz family, Germans who made their home at 97 Orchard Street in the 1870s; the Sephardic Confino family from Turkey who came to America in 1914; the Baldizzi family, Italian Catholics who lived in the building in the 1930s; and the Orthodox Jewish Rogarshevsky family, who lived in the building for over 35 years.

The Levines, Jewish immigrants from Plonsk, Poland (then in the Russian Empire) moved into 97 Orchard Street in the early 1890s. In the ten-plus years that they lived in the building, Jennie gave birth to four children and Harris ran a garment shop out of their front room. Immediately upon entering the space, visitors see the blending of these two lives. In the bedroom, Jennie is with the midwife awaiting the birth of her third child, Max. In the rest of the apartment, Harris' dress shop is in various states of disarray, the workers having gone home for the day. Through this space that is both a home and a workplace, the themes of family, survival, and the importance of the garment industry to newly arrived immigrants are discussed. In addition, the new apartment raises questions about the garment industry today, and what changes have occurred over the last 100 years.

In New York City, and in the Lower East Side in particular, the garment industry has always been both a curse and a blessing to newly arrived immigrants. With the invention of the sewing machine in 1844 and the demand for ready-made clothing, (sparked by the need for uniforms during the Civil War) the industry grew by leaps and bounds. Garment shops began to pop up everywhere in the city, from the Bowery to the Bronx. On Orchard Street alone, on the block between Broome and Delancey Streets, 23 garment shops were in operation by the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. New York's dominance as America's culture and fashion center also fueled the garment industry by providing constantly changing styles upon demand. In 1910, 70% of the nation's women's clothing and 40% of the men's were produced in the city.

Today, even though many garment contractors have moved overseas, this industry still accounts for 1/3 of the city's manufacturing jobs. While strict regulations and attempts at reform have helped, regulating the garment trade still proves difficult. Even now shops spring up and disappear overnight. The industry still depends heavily on, and all too often exploits, low-skilled immigrant labor. On the Lower East Side alone, 500 garment factories are in operation and over 75% of the workers are immigrants. Many of these workers, as well as contractors, manufacturers, designers, and retailers have generously donated time to the Museum to record their thoughts and feelings about the industry they work in. Visitors to the Levine apartment will hear these stories and learn about the industry, past and present, in which so many immigrants have given their life to. Through this family and the story of the garment worker, visitors are invited to address the contemporary implications of history. May Yeng Chen, Vice President of UNITE! (Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees) and Trustee of the Tenement Museum says, "The Museum is opening a wonderful opportunity to reflect on the apparel industry in New York then and now. Today, new waves of immigrants, from China and other parts of Asia, from Latin America and the

Caribbean, are still producing garments which make New York an important fashion capital. These workers and businesses are still an important part of New York's economy and culture, especially here on the Lower East Side."

The Levine Family Garment Shop has been underwritten by: The National Endowment for the Humanities, The Twenty-First Century ILGWU Heritage Foundation, The Rockefeller Foundation, and The New York State Council on the Arts. Major Support has been provided by: Amalgamated Bank & UNITE!, and The Nash Foundation. Additional Support has been provided by: The New York Council for the Humanities, Cynthia Woods Mitchell Fund for Historic Interiors / National Trust for Historic Preservation, Ronald S. Lauder, The Helena Rubinstein Foundation, The Steven H. & Alida Brill Scheuer Foundation, and Maurice J. Cohn.

"The Levine Family Garment Shop" can be viewed Tuesday through Sunday

Tickets for all tours and programs can be purchased, at least one day in advance, via the TicketWeb website at [www.ticketweb.com](http://www.ticketweb.com) or the TicketWeb phone service at 800/965-4827 9AM – 7PM CST. Please note, same day tickets will still be available for purchase at the Museum's Visitors Center at 90 Orchard Street.

All tours start at 90 Orchard Street, corner of Broome Street, New York City

INTERVIEWS AND PHOTOGRAPHS AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST

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