**Life as a Factory Worker**

**Instructions**:

Examine the 5 pictures depicting life as a factory worker in the Lower East Side and read the captions. Using the “Photo Activity Worksheet,” record your observations and impressions.

Then, read the memoirs from Rose Cohen, a Jewish worker, and Louis Borgenicht, a Jewish factory owner, and answer the questions provided.

**Rose Cohen Recalls Her First Day on the Job in a Piecework Shop (Modified)**

**Background**: *At the time described in this excerpt, Rose Cohen was 12 or 13, living with her family and working in a garment factory. In this passage Rose discusses what it is like to work 12–hour days in the shop where she was employed.*

The next morning when I came into the shop at 7 am, I saw at once that all the people were there and working steadily…when the boss shouted gruffly, “Look here, girl, if you want to work here you better come in early [before 7 am]…”

From this … point forward, my life become very hard. … He paid me three dollars a week and for this he hurried me from early morning until late at night … I understood that he was taking advantage of me because I was a child…

I said to my father, “But if I did piece work, I would not have to hurry so. And I could go home earlier when the other people go.”

Father explained further, “It pays him better to employ you by the week. Don’t you see if you did **piecework** he would have to pay you as much as he pays a woman piece worker? But this way he gets almost as much work out of you for half the amount a woman is paid.”

**piecework**: When workers are paid by each garment or piece of a garment they complete. The quicker and longer they work, the more the money they can earn.

**Source**: Rose Cohen, *Out of the Shadow: A Russian Jewish Girlhood on the Lower East Side* (New York: George H. Doran, 1918), 110–113. Reprinted by Cornell University Press, 1995.

**Discussion Questions for Rose Cohen’s Recollections about Her First Day on the Job in a Piecework Shop**

1. What was working in the factory like for Rose Cohen?
2. How was Rose Cohen’s experience different from the other workers in the factory? Why was her experience different?
3. Why do you think Rose Cohen continued to work in the factory?
4. How was her experience different from the experiences of 12- or 13-year-olds living in the United States today?

**Louis Borgenicht Describes Working Life at the Turn of the Century**

**Background**: *Louis Borgenicht immigrated to the United States in 1889 with experience buying and selling fabric and clothing. Eventually Borgenicht became a leader in the girls’ clothing industry, owning several factories in multiple states. He was also a philanthropist in the New York Jewish community. In 1942 he wrote a memoir about his life called the “Happiest Man” from which these excerpts are taken.*

*In this excerpt, Louis Borgenicht reflects on his experience establishing his own business soon after arriving to the United States.*

In the old days labor did not organize and fight for higher wages and shorter hours. Everybody *wanted* to work hard, and as long as flesh could endure. They wanted to because through this hard work there was for the humblest employee the chance of a great future.

[…]

This country was not built by labor’s concern for hours or wages, nor by businessmen’s fears for their money. It was built by work and faith. I saw it with my own eyes. And I saw that that work and that faith were based on one single thing—economic opportunity.

**Source**: Friedman, Harold. *The Happiest Man: The Life of Louis Borgenicht As Told to Harold Friedman*. G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1942. p. 365.

**Discussion Questions about Louis Borgenicht’s Description of Working Life at the Turn of the Century**

1. Louis Borgenicht was also a relatively new immigrant. How did his experience differ from that of other immigrants? In what ways was it similar?
2. What does Louis Borgenicht say about a worker’s opportunity to have a “great future?” Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. What does Louis Borgenicht mean when he says “labor did not organize?” What is organizing?
4. Why did some workers organize into unions?
5. What is Louis Borgenicht’s opinion about labor unions and organizing?

**Louis Borgenicht Describes Celebrating an Employee’s Wedding**

**Background**: *In this excerpt, Jewish factory owner Louis Borgenicht describes a wedding for one of his employees that was held at the winter home he built for his family in 1913. His family also owned a country estate in the Catskill Mountains that they lived in during the summer.*

This last was a proud house, but we were humble. Just before the building was completed, Regina informed me that the daughter of one of the small contractors who handled work for me was being married.

“She can’t afford the kind of a wedding she’d like,” said my wife. She hesitated, then went on firmly. “Couldn’t we have it here, as sort of a housewarming?”

To me it seemed no festive occasion could match that wedding as an expression of joy and gratefulness in our hearts. The ceremony was held in the living room, to the music of fiddlers banked on the gallery above.

**Source**: Friedman, Harold. *The Happiest Man: The Life of Louis Borgenicht As Told to Harold Friedman*. G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1942. pp.276-277

**Discussion Questions about Louis Borgenicht’s Description of an Employee’s Wedding**

1. What does this passage tell you about Louis Borgenicht’s home life? How is his home life different from the lives of most factory workers at this time?
2. What does this passage tell you about Louis Borgenicht’s relationship to the people he employs?

**Jewish Daily Forward**

**Headline**

**Working Conditions of Factory Worker and Owner – Different Perspectives**

**Instructions**: Using the photographs, as well as the memoirs of Rose Cohen and Louis Borgenicht as a guide, write an article describing the working conditions as a Jewish factory worker or a factory owner in early 20th century New York. Were these experiences similar, or different? Why, or why not?. b